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Teaching and Learning to Teach as Principled Practice

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My mind has struggled to name the terror in my repeated attempts to present well-considered lessons to a classroom of energetic yet challenging students. Half of my struggle is against myself and my own expectation that I can't handle such "difficult" kids. A portion of my struggle is comprised of sheer exhaustion and the emotional cost of repeatedly putting myself out there; scrambling to quickly learn to crawl, stumble, walk, and then run in the 40-yard dash that is the construction of a new teacher's knowledge of the world and work of an educator. Certainly I struggle with the enormity of a small classroom full of 35 fifteen-year-olds and the intricacies of how to both keep their attention and teach them something. Finally, there is the emotional toll of caring so much about what my students and I are experiencing, both apart and together.

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My hope is to find the proper process with which to move all this information through my brain in a way that will facilitate developing the magic answer that will save me in the midst of the chaos. My fear is that I will end this year by abandoning these kids in favor of my emotional health and well-being. I have been close, in the past few weeks, to giving up and giving in. It is truly a struggle. And still, I feel incapable of naming or explaining most of it.¹

—Debra Perrin, first-year high school English teacher

Few professions can promise as much reward, and guarantee as much challenge, as teaching. Few experiences are as satisfying as being responsible for a student's learning, for the satisfaction and pride that pours out of students' eyes at the magical "aha!" moment. Yet, few endeavors can be as complex and pose as much a threat to one's sense of self-efficacy, especially because to teach students what is essential for them to know in the best way possible, all of society must change first; and public education is the very institution through which change is to occur. How can we solve this conundrum?

Learning to teach is a lifelong commitment. Teaching teachers is an enormous responsibility. Mindful of the enormity of our task as teacher educators at Mills College, we move forward, observing, probing, caring, talking, thinking about what and how we teach and its implications. One could say that our charge extends beyond making sure that teachers such as Debra have the wherewithal to keep from "giving up and giving in" to the overwhelming challenge that teaching, especially in poor, urban schools, represents. Our responsibility ultimately rests with Debra's students and the thousands of students taught by the teachers we teach. We are responsible for making sure that all these students, as a result of the very thoughts, feelings, actions, and words of their teachers, live in a more equitable and just society. This is the fundamental principle that guides our practice.

In this book, we show, for example, not merely how learning to teach can be framed by the standards outlined by the State of California and administered by the State Commission for Teacher Credentialing, but also how it can be guided by a set of principles dedicated to social justice as reflected in excellent outcomes and equitable opportunities for youth and children in urban public schools. These principles are designed to work together in the interest of ambitious teaching practice that addresses squarely the needs of all learners. Our teacher education

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practice reflects our urban setting in Oakland, California. So do our coupled commitments to equity and social justice. We believe that in spite of the many extraordinary problems facing schools—and in the large urban environment where we are located, there are, indeed, many—these institutions hold more promise than others for redistributing wealth and opportunity in our country and for reinvigorating our democratic ideal.

The authors of this book have been working with a vision for effective urban education for many years, some of us since 1988. Others have come on board over the years. Each time a new person joins the faculty in the Department of Education at Mills College, the vision of social justice, equity, and excellent outcomes for all children has been refined and clarified. We began with three big ideas: inquiry and reflective practice as essential to good teaching, a knowledge of developmental theory as a way of understanding how people learn, and a determination that the teachers we prepared would be agents of change in the schools. As we worked together and gained new input, other big ideas developed until we reached (for the moment) our six principles:

- Teaching is a moral act founded on an ethic of care.
- Teaching is an act of inquiry and reflection.
- Learning is a constructivist/developmental process.
- The acquisition of subject matter and content knowledge is essential.
- Teaching is a collegial act and requires collaboration.
- Teaching is essentially a political act.

These six principles have provided a set of lenses that help us to understand our practice and goals as we strive to help teachers learn to create classrooms in which social justice, equity, and powerful learning can occur. The principles can provide us with a way to move forward, to generate reasonable, effective responses to the expected and unexpected challenges of teaching.

Few institutions in our society have as much power to influence beliefs, values, and behavior as schools. Consequently, the expectations for what schools can do for society are legion. Schools are expected to educate the population so that its members can realize the American dream of a democratic society, where all people have affluent and meaningful lives, characterized by human rights and freedoms unheard of in many parts of the world. Yet, schools are currently seen as failing

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the students they serve and not fulfilling the promise of producing a literate, reflective, well-educated population that can participate intelligently in a democratic society. The historical promise of American public schools is that they should be available to all and provide the opportunity and support for all children to realize their full potential. However, historically, this promise has been inequitably fulfilled, with countless students struggling to make sense of schools that are unable to support their development and the blossoming of their full capacities and, instead, often segregate and brand them according to criteria that reflect societal biases. This inequity leads to social injustice for many American children, their families, and the communities from which they come. As a result, schools, as they currently exist, do not fulfill their historical promise and mission (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Gardner, 1991; Haberman, 2000). We must re-envision the potential of public education and the mission of the public school.

The key to that outcome, we believe, is you, the teachers who teach or will teach in those schools. You must be well prepared, both in the subject matters you teach and in ways to transform that subject matter into meaningful learning opportunities for your students. You must be acutely aware of the moral nature of your work and your responsibility to act in the best interest of your students and the students' families, as well as their communities. Given the complexity of your work and its inherently political nature, you must be prepared to work productively in schools as they are and to participate in creating them anew. This requires that you are equipped to learn as well as to teach and that your professional reflective capabilities are keen. Knowing that you are not alone in the work of teaching is important as well. If you accept the enormity of the task as we have described it here, then you know that your capacity for building a community of practice is not marginal to the work—rather it is central.

In this book, we talk about preparing teachers with this set of knowledge and skills as well as with the disposition to do what must be done. In this time of increased regulation and standardization, we believe it is critical to put another voice forward—one that embraces the need for high standards and powerful school and university practice, one that believes the road to getting there is the careful conceptualization of what the work of teaching entails and the construction of an integrated set of learning experiences to get there.

A principled practice approach to teacher education differs from both what has happened historically and what is being asked of most

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teacher-education programs today. Historically, teacher-education programs were expected to verify that teachers had achieved a certain level of competency in specific areas (such as the teaching of reading or classroom management). How those levels were to be achieved and how that was to be judged were up to each program to demonstrate. This approach, while attempting to be all-encompassing, was fragmented, failing to provide teachers with an integrated sense they could use to judge their own practice once they were certified. A more recent move has been toward the identification and codification of standards for teacher-education programs and their graduates. This model, too, has for the most part resulted in a fragmented, disconnected view of what needs to be done. It is not that the common standards outlined by state departments of education are not important; it is that the way in which they are articulated again fails to help teachers see how the whole may fit together. Throughout the United States, state legislation has mandated new standards for “qualified” teachers that are applicable to both beginning and experienced teachers. These standards are simultaneously specific and inclusive of a broad range of connected ideas. They include, for example, general teaching standards (for example, the California standards for the teaching profession), frameworks and standards for each subject matter, teaching performance expectations for beginning teachers, and standardized assessments to judge teaching performance. However, all these standards and assessments are focused primarily on what is at the surface of teaching: classroom environment, lesson planning, individualization of instruction, assessment, and diagnosis. All of these surface features are extremely important, but when they are effective, they are the result of reflection and understanding of a set of moral and political ideas that are not articulated in the standards. Hence, the standards contain hidden assumptions and conclusions that can prevent teachers from continuing to develop and to learn.

In a way, we see similarities between how one learns to teach and how one learns a language. One way to think about learning a language is in terms of mastering its surface features: sounds, words, utterances, and phrases. After all, speaking a language is about being able to produce appropriate sounds, words, utterances, and phrases. It would seem to follow, then, that teaching a language should consist mostly of modeling and providing students with opportunities to practice producing it. This is a familiar process for millions of people visiting a foreign country, who struggle to learn a few essential expressions so they can carry on with their daily activities. *Wie geht's* or *Necesito ayuda, por favor* become essential first

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steps for second-language learners. However, true language learning only takes place when learners get beyond pragmatic needs and begin taking apart these prefabricated chunks of language. Languages are governed by principles that are more or less specific to certain languages or language groups, by grammars (not necessarily the rules one learns in school) that one must learn to go beyond a limited range of utterances and expressions. Similarly, beginning teachers learn “tricks” and useful systems of classroom management, teach prefabricated curriculum and published materials. However, it is not until they begin to understand the norms and basic assumptions that govern the behavior not only of teachers but also of students that they truly begin to learn to teach. A principled approach to teacher education is how we aim to familiarize students explicitly with the grammar of teaching and learning. Becoming proficient in a second language consists of more than simply developing a native-like accent. We now know that becoming proficient in a language is a cognitive process. In other words, more than sounding right, we need to understand how a language works. The particular six principles we rely on are not the grammar itself; rather, they serve as scaffolds for us to apprentice² beginning teachers into teaching, a most complex profession. We are not satisfied with preparing teachers who behave like teachers. We need to make sure that we prepare teachers who understand teaching deeply.

A principled approach to understanding teaching can help you to build a framework in which you can better understand and control your work. The principles get at what is at the essence of teaching: relationships, subject matter, learning and development, context for learning and teaching. All of these get represented and acted out in specific ways when we think about them in relation to any of the legislated standards, but the principles help you to think about your teaching in deeper and more powerful ways. They provide a touchstone for each of us—beginning teachers, experienced teachers, teacher educators—to evaluate and consider our practice within a widening set of arenas, including the classroom, the school, the community, and the larger political arena. In addition to providing us with the opportunity for focused reflection on practice, the principles enable us to generate solutions to identified issues. They allow us a responsive, flexible approach, as opposed to a formulized, recipe-like set of solutions. This may mean that we have to think longer and harder, even when we have no time to do so, and that we are likely to make lots of mistakes along the way. The advantage of using principles is the touchstone quality of having a gauge by which we can consider and reconsider our practice.

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The principles have operated in that manner for us. As teacher educators, each time we teach a lesson we are able to ask ourselves: What are the moral consequences of what we are doing and asking the students to do? How does this particular activity or discussion or set of readings reflect the notion of an ethic of care? In thinking about our lessons in this way, we engage in reflective practice. However, we need to think purposefully about inquiry as part of our work on a regular basis. So as we teach, we ask ourselves: What essential question can we think about based on what we are teaching? What do we want to know about our students' learning and development from this activity? Our questions require us to look at how our students are learning and how they are interacting with the content we teach them. We ask ourselves: Which students are engaged in what ways with this content? What does this tell us about the nature of what we are trying to teach? What are the larger consequences of learning or not learning this material? Which power structures does our teaching represent and support and which does it exclude and undermine? The principles provide us, as educators, with a set of lenses with which to view our own practice and with which to think about the practice of our preservice teachers.

These principles not only act as lenses through which we can consider our teaching and our students' learning but also help us to generate what it is we want to teach. Thus, for example, if we are teaching preservice teachers to teach reading, we can ask ourselves: What are the moral components of this task? What do we know about the ways people learn, and particularly the ways they learn to read, that can help us think about how and what to teach? The answers we find to these questions help us to think about what to teach in the area of learning to teach reading. Although our six principles constitute a philosophical stance that we take toward education in general and teacher education specifically, they are not without an empirical foundation. As we explain in subsequent chapters, each principle embodies a facet of what we have learned about teaching and about preparing teachers in light of our commitment to equity and social justice. Each principle is also informed by relevant research and theories. We strive to prepare the best teachers possible for urban schools, guided not by blind ideology but by informed conviction. At the same time, our concern toward clearly articulating our objectives as well as the conceptual framework behind each objective compels us to recognize that, however powerful it is, there are costs and limitations in adopting a principled approach to educating teachers.

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One potential pitfall of a principled approach to teacher education is that these principles may become rhetoric, a sort of jargon that marks users as in-group members. We are all too familiar with similar situations, in which particular words and terms are the result of the latest fad sweeping American education. Teachers often judge colleagues solely on the basis of whether they are fluent in the latest acronyms and terminology. Not only is this possibility counter to our collegiality principle but also it leads to a superficial understanding of crucial issues in education. To prevent our principles from becoming cursory jargon, we refer to them in various contexts and teach them from diverse perspectives. The chapters that follow demonstrate the different ways you might think about each of these principles in a variety of circumstances. While we can develop and encourage the development of basic questions that are inspired by the principles, we emphasize the context-specific nature of the answers to these questions. Our approach has similarities with authentic and communicative approaches to teaching vocabulary. Thus, we do not simply teach our preservice teachers a list of principles for them to memorize and regurgitate in examinations. Rather, we refer to these principles time and again in reflecting on their experiences and practice, until they begin to use the principles to talk about their own experiences. As you read this book, ask yourself questions that will enable you to understand the principles beyond the words we use.

The peril also exists that beginning teachers may interpret our principles as dogma to be followed without question. We are aware that, because we make them a central feature of our own teacher-education program, our beginning teachers may think of our six principles as “self-evident truths.” Such a position is enticing because believing something to be true excuses us from examining it critically. Furthermore, dogmatic positions foster feelings of privilege and elitism that also run counter to our overarching principle of equity and social justice. We don’t want our principles to be misconstrued as dogma. As we go along, we will ask you to question what you are reading, so that even in this limited context you can engage in reflection and critical analysis of your own learning and teaching in light of the six principles. Again, we will try to provide you with opportunities as you read the text parallel to the questions we ask of our preservice teachers. We are also quite explicit in telling our own preservice teachers that we have revised our principles and are likely to do so in the future, precisely because they are neither fully adequate yet, nor are they likely ever to be.

Relying on a fixed set of principles to understand and talk about learning and teaching in the context of public schools also has the potential of limiting our ability to fully appreciate the complexity of the phenomenon we examine. All knowledge has the characteristic of being reductionist in that it defines our perception. For instance, our belief that learning is a constructivist process in fact prevents us from seeing learning as anything but a constructivist process. We are aware of this. However, we also realize that we gain much from thinking about learning in this manner. Seeing learning as being socially co-constructed provides us with a powerful model not only for understanding ways in which our students and all students learn but also for guiding our teaching and that of our students. At least until we find more powerful theories or ways to think about learning and teaching, we will rely on our principles as six possible lenses and descriptors for looking at and talking about our own and our preservice teachers' work.

Finally, we realize that we cannot go on adding principles to our list, regardless of how many distinct facets we are able to identify in our quest to prepare the best possible teachers for urban schools. At present, our six principles seem sufficient. Still, the process since its beginning has been additive, and it remains to be seen how many principles may be too many. Similarly, as we further understand our task as teacher educators, we may choose to split one of the principles into two or more subcomponents. One way to prevent our principles from becoming an unwieldy or cumbersome list is for us to constantly assess their usefulness. Similarly, we need to be somewhat conservative in deciding to add principles to our list. This should not be taken to mean that we have been impulsive when adding new principles. New principles have been added only when we were able to define them and articulate a strong argument for their usefulness and appropriateness.

Despite the possible limitations and potential problems of a principled approach to preparing teachers, we have ample evidence suggesting that the advantages of this approach clearly outweigh the costs. Use of the principles provides a guided opportunity for reflection on and in practice, allowing for the generation of new practice, and giving a common understanding that must be made explicit in each context. In subsequent chapters, we present selected illustrations of the power of a principled approach to teacher education. However, before you begin reading about each of the principles individually, we will describe them as a whole, briefly, and consider what questions they might raise for you as you read through the following chapters.

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❖ THE PRINCIPLES

We present the following brief summaries and questions to help us paint the landscape we will explore in greater detail in subsequent chapters. Although this territory is by no means exhaustive or even fully mapped, the principles represent our effort both to prepare the best teachers possible for tomorrow's schools and to understand and imagine our practice as teacher educators. The nature of this effort has led us to a set of interrelated principles. Thus, some of the ideas or questions may seem to be overlapping. This overlap indicates the organic and linked nature of this set of ideas.

Teaching Is a Moral Act Founded on an Ethic of Care

What does it mean to say that teaching is a moral act? At the root of this principle is the idea that all teaching is based on trusting relationships. Teachers have relationships with their students, their students' families and communities, and their colleagues. In relationships based on trust, we try to act in the best interest of everyone concerned. This is not always so easy to do, and the best interest of everyone may not always be evident. Thus, this principle reminds us to ask questions with regard to our actions and decisions such as:

- What are the consequences of this action? Who will benefit? Who will suffer? In what ways?
- What are the goals I have for taking this action? How will this best serve my students? What will their families think? What about my colleagues?
- What will my students learn from this action? Will this action deepen the trust in our relationship? How will they understand what I am doing?

In reading the chapter on teaching as a moral act, try to consider some of these questions as you read along, thinking about your own teaching and learning experiences. Try to vary your focus from you as the teacher to your potential or current students and their families and to your potential or current colleagues.

Teaching Is an Act of Inquiry and Reflection

This principle reminds us to regard our teaching simultaneously as research and instruction. It reminds us to pause in the process of

making decisions and finding problem solutions. Typically, when confronted with a dilemma or problem, we like to solve it and move on to the next thing. Unfortunately, jumping directly to a solution may keep us from really addressing what is happening. If we inquire into our practice, try to understand what is really happening, and reflect on what we conclude, our solutions to problems may be very different from the ones we jump to without such considerations. This principle encourages us to make inquiry a habit of mind. To do so, we might think about questions such as:

- What is really happening here? How do I know? What evidence do I have?
- What else could it be? What other evidence is there that might support this alternative interpretation?
- What other evidence can I gather to check out these different possibilities?

Questions such as these help us to keep focused on inquiry and reflection as we teach and as we learn. As you read the chapter on teaching as an act of inquiry, try to think of examples of problems either in your own classroom or in the classroom where you are the student where these questions could help you better understand what is happening.

Learning Is a Constructivist/Developmental Process

Historically, there have been three different perspectives on the nature of learning: a behavioral/environmental explanation, a nativist/evolutionary explanation, and an interactionist/constructivist/developmental explanation. None of these perspectives is any longer uniquely followed. It is recognized that all of them contain some of the truth. However, American education has long been modeled on a behaviorist explanation of how children learn. This explanation can lead to the belief that when you tell someone something, they hear what you have said and learn it as you presented it. We don't believe that learning works that way. On the contrary, we believe that each of us brings to a learning situation a host of previous experiences that will influence how we interpret that situation and what we will make of it. Thus, each of us *constructs* for ourselves our own understanding, influenced by, among other things, our own previous experience, our own language, our own culture, and our own community or social experiences.

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The principle or belief that learning is a constructivist/developmental process encourages us to ask the following kinds of questions as we teach:

- What do I hope my students will understand from this lesson? How do I know that they are ready to understand the lesson in this way? What evidence do I have?
- When I ask my students questions, are their answers related to what I have asked? What question are they answering? If they are answering a different question, what does this tell me about what they do and do not understand?
- If they give the “correct” answer, how can I be clear on what it is they understand about the issue at hand? What evidence do I need?
- What do I know about these particular students and the ways that they learn? What does developmental theory tell me about children this age? What particular things do I know about them, their families, their communities, their language, their interests and passions that will help me figure out how to engage them in what I am required to teach them?
- In what ways has my understanding of the content, students, and my practice changed as a result of my teaching?

Questions such as these help us to focus on the learner as we teach. They help us to think about what is going on for our students even as we concentrate on what we teach. As you read this chapter, think about when these questions might be most useful to you.

The Acquisition of Subject Matter and Content Knowledge Is Essential

In some ways, this principle may seem the most obvious. If you are going to teach, you must teach something. If we are committed to an agenda of social justice and equitable opportunities and excellent outcomes for all students, then we must take seriously what we teach and how we teach it. We need to think about the nature of the discipline we are teaching and what its fundamental questions are. We need to think about whom we are teaching and the match between the nature of the discipline and our particular students. We need to think about what the state or district expects of us in terms of curriculum and pedagogy and

coordinate that with what we believe to be the best for our students with regard to content and instruction. Questions such as the following can be posed:

- In what ways has my understanding of the content, students, and my practice changed as a result of my teaching?
- What do I understand about the nature of the discipline? What does it mean to know mathematics or literature? What does it mean to be a scientist or a historian? How can I give my students the opportunity to try this on?
- How does my curriculum reflect my learners' experiences and understanding?

As you read the chapter on subject matter, raise questions like these for yourself about your own teaching and learning experiences and about your own efforts to create and adapt appropriate and effective curriculum and pedagogy.

Teaching Is a Collegial Act and Requires Collaboration

We have said quite a bit already about the importance of relationships in teaching and the importance of inquiry and reflection. Knowledge, we believe, is socially constructed; much of what we learn we learn with others, even if the ultimate construction is an individual endeavor. Thus, our colleagues and our students and their families are instrumental in our learning, as well in their own. This principle focuses on how teaching is collegial and what collaboration can do to help us teach better and to continue to learn more about our own practice. As you read about this principle and reflect on your own practice, you might keep some of the following questions in mind:

- What have others done to teach this subject matter to students like mine? Who at my school site might want to collaborate with me on this curriculum?
- Has anyone else struggled with a child with these particular needs or interests? Who can I confer with to help me teach this child the best way I can?
- What opportunities can I find for bringing up important issues (issues of equity, for example) in a way that will have all of us

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working together on the issue in a productive way? What can I learn from others about this issue?

- At our grade level (or department) meetings, what can I do to ensure that we work productively on big-idea questions?
- What are my responsibilities to students, their families, my colleagues, administrators, and other members of my professional community? How can they help me in my teaching?

Thinking about opportunities for collaboration and collegiality can lead to powerful knowing on the part not only of teachers but also of children, as teachers pool their understandings and challenge each other's assumptions. The support and enjoyment that can be gained from collegial relationships are among the most satisfying aspects of teaching. Collegiality and collaboration can help create schools that are places of lifelong learning for the adults who work in them as well as for the children and families who are their clientele.

Teaching Is Essentially a Political Act

Early in this introduction, we put forward the notion that major societal and political changes can be effected by schools and schooling. This principle makes that notion explicit and helps us to think about how the political nature of teaching is manifested moment to moment on a daily basis. In the chapter that focuses on this principle, we use a particular example to illustrate what we mean by this, but it is important to remember that each act you make as a teacher has a political meaning and consequence. Thus, as you think about this principle and your teaching, you might ask yourself the following questions:

- In choosing to teach this curriculum from this perspective, whose points of view am I highlighting and whose am I neglecting? How can I make sure to include other perspectives?
- Are the curricula and pedagogies I use accessible and meaningful in various ways to all my students?
- What do I know about the political and cultural experiences of the community of this school? What experiences are common for the children and their families? How are they like or unlike experiences with which I myself am familiar?
- How are families enfranchised or disenfranchised by the school district and school regulations? How do parents or other family members interact with the school and its personnel? How can I

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contribute to a positive experience for the children I teach and their families?

- What are institutional or cultural beliefs about the subject matter I am teaching? How do these coordinate with what I believe about how students will best learn this content?
- Is my authority as a teacher enhancing my students' capacity to become active and contributing members of society? Besides my role in the classroom, what else do I do that has political consequences for me and my students?

Cobb, Wood, and Yackel (1993) point out that to fully understand what happens in a classroom, one must consider not only the relationship between individual knowledge and institutionalized practices but also the broader sociopolitical setting and the function of the school as a societal institution. Cobb et al. are speaking of the teaching of mathematics, but their statement could apply to any discipline. As you read the chapter on teaching as political, raise questions for yourself about what is political about what you are teaching and how that political nature is manifested in your everyday classroom life.

Each of these chapters provides you with a different lens to think about the nature of teaching and learning, both for your students and for yourselves as teachers. The chapters serve to make explicit the richness and complexity of the act of teaching. The principles provide us with an integrated, explicit, and deep way to think about the work we do, as well as its significance not only for ourselves and our individual students but also for the communities we serve. We continue to believe that these principles will help us change schools to serve the democratic ideals that they profess. We also hope that you will join us in a larger conversation about what it means to learn to teach and prepare future teachers who will fulfill the lofty yet worthy promise of education to create a better world for all. Neither we nor any one group of educators has the answer to the complex and vexing challenges facing schools these days. Thus, we invite you to critically consider the positions and perspectives that this book represents and engage in appropriate, thoughtful action.

❖ NOTES

1. Reprinted with permission from Debra Perrin.
2. We use *apprentice* in agreement with cognitive apprenticeship models, in which apprentices are taught "to think like experts" (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989, p. 488).

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