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Suzanne Ehst

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## **“I Love the Country but I Can’t Stand the Scene”: Teaching Literature to Examine and Complicate Adolescent National Identity**

*Winner, 2013 Graduate Humanities Conference*

By Suzanne Ehst  
Department of English

I was teaching high-school English on September 11, 2001. As my seniors finished their essay exams on the novel *Siddhartha*, a colleague poked her head into my room to whisper to me, “There’s something going on at The World Trade Center. A plane flew into one of the buildings... and it might not have been an accident.” As students finished their tests, I passed on this breaking news, which prompted one of my self-proclaimed globally aware students to ask, “The World Trade Center...that’s in D.C., right?” In subsequent days, students’ everyday lexicons grew to include places, phrases, and names like “Al-Qaeda,” “Osama bin Laden,” “twin towers,” and “global terrorist networks” as these attacks on the United States spawned a new awareness of the political struggles in and with countries of the modern Middle East.

Yet it’s unsettling to me that, for my students as for many U.S. citizens, the narrative of “The War on Terror” begins with that cataclysmic event.

The high school where I was teaching prides itself on nurturing globally informed, politically aware students, and developing students as “global citizens” is explicitly named as a school-wide core value. Perhaps it’s presumptuous to say that if my students entered the 9/11/01 era with little related global context, then the majority of U.S. high school students were similarly naïve. However, studies of both mainstream rhetoric and U.S. secondary schools suggest that the dominant American narrative begins on September 11 with a declaration that “they” (terrorists) attacked “us” (innocents) because they are evil and we stand for good. This bowdlerized version of the 9/11/01 story isn’t just a layman’s perspective; when articulated by the country’s leader and repeated endlessly on the airwaves, it saturates youth’s malleable sense of national identity.

Students such as mine are in a developmental phase when they are actively constructing social identities and building/refining personal ideologies. While Erik Erickson attributed general questions to this phase like “Who am I?” and “Where am I going?”, studies of adolescence conclude that high school students are also seeking group identification, including the construction of a national identity. More specific versions of Erikson’s core questions might include, “What does it mean to be ‘American?’” “What do we mean by the phrase, ‘American values?’” and “What are the national myths that I reject or espouse?” While core aspects of adults’ belief systems are somewhat fixed, the adolescent’s ideology is comparatively fluid. It is imperative that educators leverage this developmental phase to foster in youth a critical consciousness with regard to their American identities. Specifically, teachers of literature are uniquely positioned to invite students to consider complicating narratives, texts written from international perspectives that critically describe the impacts of United States’ foreign policy and both expose and challenge our national myths about who we are as a country and how we act on the national stage. The intent of such study is not to undermine students’ love of country, but rather to augment democratic participation through a more globally informed, nuanced understanding of national identity.

I reluctantly admit that in the fall of 2001, my own English classroom was not a powerful instrument for developing students’ critical awareness of pre- and post-9/11 politics. In the days following the attacks, our online discussion forum did turn toward current events, with students sharing thoughts on civil liberties, nonviolence, grief, and their questions about the

conditions that gave rise to the terrorist attacks. This lasted a few days, however, before we returned to the scheduled Shakespearean play. I was, after all, in the process of preparing them for college.

I have come to believe that this was a missed opportunity, both on my part and on the part of thousands of teachers who returned to their time-honored curricula in the wake this national "earthquake."

By "national identity," I mean something distinctly different from "ethnic identity" or "multiculturalism." Education in recent decades has increasingly devoted attention to the latter. Scholars like James Banks, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and Linda Christensen represent this trend; their work in multicultural education, critical race theory, and social justice education respectively have had a definitive impact on public education goals, teacher training, and curriculum. For example, accreditation by NCATE<sup>1</sup>, the most influential teacher education accreditation body, is contingent upon the degree to which a college of education prepares future teachers to take an inclusive, strengths-based approach to "diversity" in teacher training. In contrast, standards for both curriculum and teacher training say virtually nothing about the discussion of national identity, though this is arguably one of the founding principles of the U.S. public school system.

National identity is often conceptualized as shared ancestry, background, and experience, yet these traits, according to Heather Malin, are less applicable to our racially dynamic, pluralistic society. Contemporary national identity, claims Malin, is better described as a set of "shared beliefs, civic attitudes, and actions" (59). Specifically, Os Guinness describes "Americanism" as including the following ideals: "notions of equal opportunity, freedom of conscience, freedom of speech...the rule of law, separation of church and state" (qtd. in Malin 56-57).

While these ideals might be taught in the social studies curriculum as fact, critical examination of them, especially post-9/11/01, is blatantly absent in adolescents' education, and the idea that September 11 should foster a reflective national discourse is far from popular. Those attempting to raise any questions of how The United States' foreign policy might have influenced the attacks are quickly deemed anti-American, and this sentiment—prizing nationalist fervor over reflective democratic discourse—pervades the public schools as well. Thea Renda Abu El-Haj, Professor of Education at Rutgers University, claims that "from the colonization of indigenous peoples to the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, education has played a critical role as a force for spreading American ideals and values" (245). Abu El-Haj argues that these forces, often presented as benevolent and liberatory, shroud imperial ambitions. Additionally, they leverage the classroom space to promote a kind of national mythmaking through curriculum and discourse. Certainly this is not the case in all schools, in all classrooms, and for all students; however, trends of promoting unquestioning nationalism over what we might call "critical patriotism" can be traced in three areas of curriculum, often described by curricular theorists as "explicit," "latent," and "null" curriculum.

Studies of national symbols in public schools illustrate the prizing of unquestioning loyalty in the "explicit curriculum," the portion of curriculum and school agenda that is consciously taught and promoted. For example, from 2001 to 2003, 17 states enacted or amended "pledge laws," and as of 2011, 35 states mandated that the Pledge of Allegiance be recited on a daily basis in U.S. schools (Chiodo 39). Shortly after 9/11, a group in Madison, Wisconsin attempted to pass legislation that would ensure all students actively participated in reciting the pledge; when this was struck down by the school board as an infringement on students' rights, the epithet "Anti-American" was cast at both the board and at any student who dared not recite the pledge for reasons of conscience (Ladson-Billings qtd. in Chiodo 42). While this study of the pledge is just one small component of a typical school day, these

findings are symptomatic of a public-school discourse that prioritizes recitation of national ideals over reflective examination of them

“Latent curriculum” refers to the way in which students are implicitly taught through the thousands of interactions that occur every day in the schools—images in textbooks, disciplinary policies, arrangement of furniture, dress codes, etc. all send students messages about national, social, and academic values. Post-9/11/01 implications for the latent curriculum are illustrated by a case study of a diverse suburban high school in Pennsylvania. In this study, Abu El-Haj conducted qualitative research to examine how students’ sense of nationality was constructed through “everyday racialized and gendered discourses and practices inside [the] school” (243). With a special focus on Palestinian-American students, Abu El-Haj concluded that through their speech about and with Muslim students, well-meaning teachers

*unconsciously* mobilized contemporary political discourse about ‘a clash of civilizations’ and its relation to the war on terror to create *us* as a benevolent nation in which individual freedom, tolerance, and political liberty reign supreme against *them* who stand for cultural captivity, intolerance, and political oppression. (250, emphasis in the original)

Abu El-Haj illustrated this sentiment through multiple interviews and anecdotes, including that of a well-meaning female teacher who asked to see a female student’s hair, concealed by her hijab. In an interview, this teacher presented her actions as a kind of feminist liberation; however, the student responded with discomfort, causing Abu El-Haj to describe such actions as reifying the idea of an “us” who loves freedom liberating a “them” plagued by repression.

Such anecdotes of post-9/11 school culture illustrate a dangerous trend not just because of what *is* being taught, consciously and unconsciously, but because of what is being omitted (the “null” curriculum): namely critical discourse about and informed understanding of the most important geopolitical issues of students’ current worlds. In a public lecture, Allen Webb, Professor of English Education, said that he often asks his undergraduate seniors how many of them studied September 11<sup>th</sup> or the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in high school. Webb noted that in classes of 20 to 30 students, usually one or two students indicate such units of study. While this is an informal survey conducted from professorial interest, Webb concluded that literature bears out what he observed in his own Midwestern students: U.S. high schools often gloss or omit the study of 21<sup>st</sup>-century war and terrorism, thus perpetuating the ideal that the United States is a country of peace and freedom and resisting a national identity complicated by narratives of aggression and preemptive war.

When such discourse is squelched, we make room for national narratives that border on (or cross into) jingoism. While it’s popular to blame “the media” in a generalized manner for fostering such distortions, several specific studies do help us understand the type of media-generated narrative that education often fails to counter, and thus ostensibly upholds. In the documentary *Reel Bad Arabs*, Dr. Jack Shaheen reports on his analysis of the depiction of Arabs in more than 1,000 Hollywood films. The patterns in these films lead Shaheen to conclude, “We know the mythology of Arab as ‘villain’ regardless of where we live,” and more recent films develop that generalized villain into a caricature of the modern-day terrorist. These repeated images obviously beget stereotyping, but Shaheen also asserts their political implications: “Politics and Hollywood’s images are linked,” he claims. “They reinforce one another.”

An additional effect of these stereotypes is a decrease in empathy for the Middle Easterner. In such one-dimensional portrayals, “the humanity is not there,” Shaheen says. “And if we cannot see the Arab’s humanity, what’s left? If we feel nothing, if we feel that the Arabs are not like us, then let’s kill them all. They deserve to die, right?” Perhaps the most important conclusion Shaheen makes is that “Islamophobia” has become part of the American

psyche, yet the stereotype is invisible to many. We embrace the mythology of the "reel bad Arab" without realizing the destructive inaccuracies of the myth.

Another subtler way in which students' national narratives are limited is through social networking and online search engines. In a 2011 TED talk, MoveOn.org organizer Eli Pariser gives a compelling account of the way in which online interfaces use algorithms to tailor news to our preferences. While this might initially seem helpful, Pariser calls this a dangerous "filter bubble" that protects us from any stories and perspectives that might challenge our existing viewpoints. To exemplify, he describes two friends in New York who Googled "Egypt" during the Arab spring and got drastically different results; one friend's top hits were of political updates while the other's were largely travel sites and tantalizing tourist images. This type of phenomenon helps to explain a 2007 *Newsweek* poll that found roughly 41% of Americans polled still believed that Saddam Hussein had something to do with the 9/11/01 attacks (Braiker). If we seek only news sources that confirm our pre-existing biases, the internet algorithms will readily aid us in sheltering ourselves from any complicating evidence.

The risk in such illustrations is that some youth cement their national identities in a dangerously uncomplicated manner. Little in the school system challenges them to question what educational activist Parker Palmer calls "national myths" that we adhere to even when reality contradicts those myths. Among these, Palmer claims, is the myth that "America is the world's leading superpower," this moniker describing our ability "to achieve major foreign policy by military might" (182). In this national myth, such policy is often associated *only* with the promotion of justice and freedom, and not with economic and political self-interest.

Drawing on a long history of educational philosophers like John Dewey and Horace Mann, Palmer lauds the classroom as one space where students might be "formed inwardly" to play a creative role in democratic society. One job of the teacher, according to Palmer, is to help students connect the "big stories" of human history with their own "little stories" (122), a narrative way of constructing social and national identity. To illustrate, Palmer reflects on his own childhood introduction to the Holocaust and how, as a young student, he was able to process this era as if it were something "that had happened on some other planet" (126). Little in his teacher's presentation encouraged him to connect himself to the horrific human experiences embedded in the historical narrative. Too often, stories of global injustice are taught as if they happened "over there" or "back then," freeing us from the necessity of self-reflection in the wake of such facts, allowing us to avoid the connections to ourselves, here, today.

With regard to 9/11/01, the decades leading up to it, and the decade following, how we tell the story matters. It matters a great deal. First, to use Palmer's language, we must find ways to help students connect their "little stories" to this "big story," including the students who appear to have no immediate connection. Additionally, we must encourage students to see that to begin the 9/11/01 story on 9/11 is to begin in medias res; there are decades of prehistory that help us better understand the attacks *without exonerating the hijackers*.

This latter point is admittedly contentious territory, especially for teachers whose job security often hinges on parental and community approval. It is, however, necessary territory. Judith Butler argues, "The United States needs to think about how its own political investments and practices help to create a world of enormous rage and violence" (14). In her collection of five essays, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, she explicitly denies that such national introspection exonerates the 9/11/01 hijackers. Rather, she claims, it invites us to start the story of this horrific event earlier, to look beyond merely examining the "personal pathology" of the likes of Mohammad Atta or Osama bin Laden to understand any "relevant prehistory" (5). Claiming that there *is* no relevant prehistory and the only motivations for the attacks are "they hate our freedoms" is possibly more comfortable; but it is not ethically superior and, I would argue, it is profoundly "un-American" in that it ignores the value of engaged and informed democratic participation.

In what ways, then, are the secondary English curriculum and teacher uniquely positioned to invite students toward a more complicated national identity in general, and a fuller 9/11/01 understanding specifically? While it might seem like a logical connection, state and national standards say almost nothing about the use of literature to develop an introspective, globally informed national identity. The common core standards, adopted by 45 states, heavily emphasize textual analysis, and such standards are linked to precious few aims beyond reading and interpretation skills. Notably absent is the use of literature to make sense of present-day issues on a national and international scale. Also informative is the list of “illustrative texts,” or texts suggested to illustrate “the complexity, quality, and range of student readings” (58). The list is populated by the likes of Fitzgerald, Steinbeck, Keats, and Twain, and interlaced with the usual females like Dickinson, Hansberry, and Hurston—all worthy texts, to be sure, but none of which provides students with any critical perspective on *recent* foreign policy, insularity, or nationalist rhetoric. While Steinbeck, Hansberry, and Hurston do offer a critique of historic discrimination, their settings allow students the luxury of what Palmer described as reading as if “that happened on some other planet”—we’ve overcome that era, thank God.

While these now-familiar standards govern particular skill sets, the introduction to The Common Core is explicit in its delegation of freedom to teachers and districts. It states that these standards are to be “complemented by a well-developed, content-rich curriculum,” and that they do not impose “a set of restrictions that limit what can be taught” (5). Despite this encouraging preamble, teachers’ intellectual freedom is often trumped by curricular mandates, especially in districts where a panic over test scores begets a policy of “teaching to the test.” My central point, however, is that the mandate to allow teachers professional, curricular freedom is written into many state’s standards and thus allows teachers creative space to develop the ethical dimensions of their own curricula.

There are three primary traits I was looking for in a text to read with high school students: 1) It could be taught to meet Common Core Standards; 2) it would be readable and engaging for 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students; and 3) it would meet the aims of complicating mainstream national narratives. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid meets all of these aims, and while I trust readers of this paper to see the implicit alignment with curricular standards, I’m mostly interested in explicitly delineating what the text might provide to students with regard to the third goal and how a teacher might work with the text to best achieve this aim.

Before examining the traits of the novel itself, I want to describe pedagogical theory that guides this teaching endeavor. Because students are reading *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* with the express intent of reflecting on their national identities, the teacher must structure personal interaction with the text into learning activities. Central to how I envision teachers working with this novel is the now-popular Reader Response theory. Despite its rich theoretical history, it is common to see high school teachers using this approach in a reductive “anything goes” sort of manner that is counterproductive to the goal of deep engagement with text. Students often respond in an “I think it, I said it, end of discussion” kind of manner. However, Louise Rosenblatt’s classic *Literature as Exploration* gives a useful theoretical framework for more meaningful engagement with the text.

In this book, Rosenblatt detailed her “transactional” theory of reading which claims that reading is “a live circuit set up between reader and text.” This explains why “meaning is not ‘in’ the text or ‘in’ the reader. Both reader and text are essential to the transactional process of making meaning” (24-27). Adolescent attention is already “to an extraordinary degree focused on the personal import of what he [sic] reads” (42); the job of the teacher, under Rosenblatt’s model, is to ensure that the exchange between reader and text is not uni-directional, with the adolescent merely reading her prior experience and ideology into the text,

but reciprocal, with the reader carefully examining the text to further refine her initial interpretations and personal perspective.

Extrapolating from this definition, Rosenblatt argues that literature is uniquely positioned to expand students' ideas about the world. The transactions between text and student often have the effect of bringing student biases and generalizations into the open for examination. When text is carefully selected and taught under this theoretical model, students "will see how often they have been dominated by ideas only because they have heard them again and again" (114). With subconscious (or conscious) biases exposed, students then return to the literature to complicate their own preconceived notions.

According to Deborah Appleman, much of contemporary high school pedagogy can best be described as a blend of Reader Response and New Criticism—carefully analyzing the text itself for how it works and responding personally to literature. However, Appleman confirms that much contemporary practice has moved away from Rosenblatt's original vision, resulting in teachers "overprivileging and romanticizing the individual at the expense of considerations of context" (31). Rich interaction with text occurs at the intersection of these two theoretical lenses, where personal reaction and careful study of the narrative are brought into conversation with one another.

Literature has the profound ability to stir an emotional reaction in students, especially around issues of grave importance—issues of equity, justice, and human relationships, or in this particular case, issues of war, liberty, national solidarity, and international relations. It has the ability to bridge "the individual's intellectual perceptions on the one hand and his [sic] emotional attitudes on the other" (Rosenblatt 170). In a story, "issues" aren't abstracted; they are embodied and animated by believably human characters, characters that trigger empathy or disgust in a way that facts, statistics, and ideas do not.

The structure of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* invites this pedagogy. The novel unfolds almost entirely in a café as a one-sided dialogue between Changez, a native Pakistani, and an unnamed, uneasy American. While we never actually see or hear the unnamed man, Changez's observations and reactions serve to characterize him for the reader. Throughout the novel, Changez breaks away from the story of his past to address the American and to observe and invite his reactions. This American, referred to only as "you," serves as a stand-in for any American reader. From the very first page when Changez addresses his companion—"Do not be frightened by my beard: I am a lover of America"—the reader, too, sits in the café with him and absorbs his critiques of American foreign policy, post-9/11/01 racial profiling, and financially driven corporate values. This narrative frame invites adolescent readers to connect their "little stories" to a "big story" (to use Palmer's phrases): "How do I respond to these critiques of my country? Do I see any truth in them? To what degree do I enable and participate in what Changez describes?"

One noteworthy trait of Changez's story is that it directly confronts what the scholars I've cited have named as core tenets of dominant national mythology: that The United States is benevolent in its foreign relations, promoting freedom and open-mindedness in countries plagued by sexism, poverty, and repression. As Changez tells his personal history, we learn that he attended a prestigious American university and was eventually employed by "Underwood Samson," a top-notch valuation firm that represents the pinnacle of the American corporate ladder. Changez's work with Underwood Samson took him to the Philippines and Chile to value companies in ways that would dramatically alter the lives of everyday locals working for those companies. While Underwood claimed their activity was neutral, Changez names the imperial nature of international corporate policy; with every company they reviewed, they promoted U.S. corporate values of "efficiency" and "advancement" (37). "In this constant striving to realize a financial future," Changez reflects, "no thought was given to the critical personal and political issues that affect one's emotional present" (145).

The text also critiques the “U.S. as superpower” myth in several ways. In Changez’s view, U.S. military involvement is rooted in self-interest, not justice, as evidenced by the U.S.’s refusal to help Pakistan in the face of Indian aggression despite their military bases already established in Pakistan. Other 20<sup>th</sup>-century military affairs in Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam earn this critique from the narrator: “I have always resented the manner in which America conducted itself in the world; your country’s interference in the affairs of others was insufferable” (156). In these and other critiques, a student reader must confront the popular image of the U.S. military as either an agent of justice or a necessary protector from outside aggression; in Changez’s eyes, the military is neither of these. It is rather the bully force of an imperial government, seeking its own gain despite the impact on the lives of others. To be clear, I am not saying that the student reader must adopt the narrative perspective; rather, honest discussion of this complicating narrative might trouble easy national ideals that are rooted in good/evil binary thinking.

Another important trait of the text is that it upends the colonial portrayal of an “us” who is civilized and a “them” who is savage. In colonial narratives, cultural achievements and histories of the colonized are often devalued and suppressed (Appleman 88). However, in several sections of text, Changez subverts the colonial narrative by painting Anglo history as barbaric and Pakistani/Urdu history as refined. It was the people of the Indus River basin that “had cities that were laid out on grids and boasted underground sewers while the ancestors of those who would invade and colonize America were illiterate barbarians” (34). Later in the text, Changez again praises the cultural history of his people when he says emphatically, “We built the Royal Mosque and the Shalimar Gardens in this city, and *we* built the Lahore Fort with its mighty walls and wide ramp for our battle-elephants. And we did these things when your country was still a collection of thirteen small colonies, gnawing away at the edge of a continent” (102).

In addition to countering the image of the “barbarian,” Hamid’s narrative also challenges the portrayal of “the Arab” critiqued by Shaheen in *Reel Bad Arabs*. The flat image of the Arab/Muslim/terrorist is countered by this round central character who expresses anger toward the United States and corporate America, but who also has a complex backstory informing his anger. Changez was successful in an Ivy League school; he was devoted to a mentally ill American woman; he feels surges of national pride, and his pride extends at times to his native Pakistan and at times to his adopted city, New York. Additionally, Changez’s anger has roots that move beyond easy causality like “he hates freedom.” It also moves beyond mere “personal pathology,” which Butler says is an inadequate explanation for terrorism. Changez’s anger is rooted in systemic factors such as global corporate influence that ignores the needs of the local people and post-9/11/01 “line-drawing” that repeatedly declares him outside of the American “tribe” (117).

A teacher of this novel might also invite students to consider the role of gaze, perception, and seeing: What are the lenses through which characters (and, by association, students) look through? Our imaginations often impose identity on another, and it is our job to do as Changez has done, to take off these lenses and examine them, examine our perception, instead of focusing intently on the other. This imposed gaze is illustrated when Changez is riding in a car with his colleagues in Manila. At a stoplight, he realizes that a Filipino man of about his age is staring angrily at him through the car windows. In this moment, Changez sees himself as this other man sees him: a sell-out to his own culture. Changez then turns to a “fair-haired colleague” sitting next to him and thinks, “You are so foreign” (67). These lucid moments of self-awareness are piqued by an examination of the self in relation to another, and invite students to a similar exercise of considering oneself and one’s country from the view of “The Other.”

Viewing oneself through the eyes of another can be painful, and some scenes in this text may elicit a defensive anger from students. The most difficult passage of the novel to teach is

likely when Changez sees and responds to the planes crashing into the World Trade Center on September 11<sup>th</sup>. While students might have varied reactions to this iconic image—from anger to pain to fear and even awe—it is almost definite that Changez’s reflexive smile will make most North Americans bristle. Even his later qualification that his thoughts weren’t with the victims but “with the symbolism of it all” (73) would do little to pacify the students who closed themselves off at the mention of a smile.

In this case, Rosenblatt’s claim that meaning is a “live circuit” between reader and text is useful. As teachers, we often want to “teach over” students’ potentially negative reactions, to justify a text before students question it or to explain a controversial passage before students articulate their offense. However, Rosenblatt invites teachers to draw student resistance into the open where it can be heard, validated, and discussed. Ideally, the discussion then leads students back into the text to further complicate or develop their unstudied reactions. In the case of Changez’s smile, the narrative frame normalizes any student anger as we see the American interlocutor bristling at this revelation. Yet despite his anger, he continues to listen to his Pakistani companion; the conversation continues despite the brazen clash of perspectives.

Clearly this text is rich in examples of how it might engage adolescents in critical reflection on patriotism, national identity, and cultural values. Yet it is just one of many books that could be used in such a way. General traits of this text that might be found in other novels, poems, and stories include the following:

- a non-Western narrative perspective is privileged,
- core aspects of content complicate popular national myths,
- elements of the text provide portals for student reflection, and
- structural elements of the text support the above.

It would be far-fetched to suggest that the implementation of a single book into an English curriculum could effect profound shifts in students’ national identities. The evolution of identity is a process that spans our entire lives, and a three-week unit in high school English is a relatively small sector of anyone’s life. However, if the pedagogy and curriculum imagined here can develop even a moderately more critical orientation toward stereotypes, national ideals, and international relations, then education is one step closer to achieving its mandate to develop students as active citizens, ready to thoughtfully engage the most pressing issues of their generation.

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<sup>1</sup> NCATE is an acronym for The National Council for Teacher Accreditation, soon to be CAEP, or The Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation.