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To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2017.1385061

Published online: 15 Oct 2017.

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Marilyn Cochran-Smitha, Megina Bakerb, Stephani Burtona, Wen-Chia Changa, Molly Cummings Carneya, M. Beatriz Fernándezc, Elizabeth Stringer Keefed, Andrew F. Millere and Juan Gabriel Sáncheza

aLynch School of Education, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA, USA; bProject Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA, USA; cAlberto Hurtado University, Santiago, Chile; dGraduate School of Education, Lesley University, Boston, MA, USA; eArchdiocese of Boston Catholic Schools Office, Braintree, MA, USA

ABSTRACT
In keeping with the theme of the 40th anniversary issue of EJTE, this article looks back and forward at US teacher education accountability. It argues that "holding teacher education accountable" has been the major approach to reforming teacher education in the US for the last two decades, assuming that enhanced teacher education quality depends on vigilant public evaluation and monitoring of outcomes related to teacher education institutions, programs, and teacher candidates. This article looks back at the "era of accountability" by examining five policy, political, and professional developments that contributed to its emergence and strong hold on US teacher education. Looking forward to the future of teacher education accountability in the US, the article argues that we need a new approach – democratic accountability in teacher education – which is based on intelligent professional responsibility for students’ learning including democratic knowledge and skills, strong equity, and genuine collaboration with multiple stakeholders.

For roughly the last two decades, ‘holding teacher education accountable’ has been the major approach to reforming teacher education in the US. The idea has been that greater accountability will boost teacher education quality, which will boost teacher quality (defined primarily in terms of students’ achievement), which will in turn ensure individual prosperity and the long-term economic health of the nation. The key accountability assumption here is that enhanced teacher education quality depends on systematic and vigilant public evaluation and monitoring of outcomes related to teacher education institutions, programmes, and teacher candidates. The rise in accountability regimes is not the case only in teacher education or only in the US. Rather in the US and to a certain extent in other western democracies (Romzek 2000), accountability has emerged as a major reform strategy in primary and secondary education (Carnoy, Elmore, and Siskin 2003; Sahlberg 2010), higher education (Alexander 2000; Trow 1996), and the public sector (O’Neill 2002; Romzek 2000). Across...
domains, the rise of accountability reflects the broad shift to a global and competitive knowledge society shaped by principles and policies derived from neoliberal economics and from the business world (Ambrosio 2013; Furlong, Cochran-Smith, and Brennan 2009; Taubman 2010).

It is important to note that there is not just one approach to accountability in teacher education, and ‘holding teacher education accountable’ is not a single or unitary concept. As we have shown (Cochran-Smith, Stern, et al. 2016; Cochran-Smith, Baker, Burton, et al. 2017), in US teacher education, as in other domains, the contemporary accountability landscape is complex. There are multiple co-existing accountability strategies and initiatives, and there are multiple – sometimes competing – accountability demands and expectations. In addition accountability plays out differently when different regulatory, professional, reform, and advocacy organisations are involved and/or when ‘the problem’ of teacher education – and the assumed solution to that problem – is conceptualised and framed in different ways.

In keeping with the theme of this 40th anniversary issue of *EJTE*, this article looks back and looks forward at the ‘era of accountability’ in US teacher education (Cochran-Smith et al., forthcoming). We do so by analysing the premises and assumptions that have defined teacher education’s era of accountability in the US. We suggest that five policy, political, and professional developments contributed to its emergence and its staying power. In this article, we take up each of these five separately, but we also show that they are closely interrelated and to a great extent, co-occurring. The authors of this article are a group of teacher education scholars and practitioners who have worked together over the last three years as members of Project TEER (Teacher Education and Education Reform) to track teacher education’s accountability policies and mechanisms within the larger context of ‘ed reform’ in the US (Cochran-Smith, Stern, et al. 2016; Cochran-Smith, Baker, Burton, et al. 2017; Cochran-Smith, Baker, Chang, et al. 2017; Cochran-Smith, Burton, et al. 2017). This article draws on the group’s joint work and on ideas from our forthcoming book, *Reclaiming Accountability: Teacher Education in Uncertain Times* (Cochran-Smith et al., forthcoming). The book makes the overall argument, which we take up at the conclusion of this article, that US teacher education needs to ‘reclaim accountability’ by reinventing it in ways that are consistent with the democratic project wherein strengthening public education is understood as a central requirement of a democratic society.

**Teacher education’s era of accountability**

Roth (1996) characterised teacher education developments in standards, licensure, certification, and accreditation in the US during the 1980s and 1990s as the ‘era of standards, wherein ambitious and consensual standards were intended to revitalise the profession. Very soon thereafter, however, teacher education’s standards era began to evolve into what we refer to here as its ‘era of accountability (and standards)’ with the primary emphasis on accountability. This was seen as a central strategy for improving the nation’s place in the global knowledge economy, ensuring the quality of the workforce, and meeting social expectations related to diversity and equality.

The impetus for education reform was the perceived crisis of mediocrity and lack of public confidence in teachers and teacher preparation, famously reflected in the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). This galvanising report linked mediocre US student performance to sluggish global economic performance. In
particular the report charged that the quality of teachers and teaching in the US was so poor that the work force the schools produced was not going to be able to compete in the emerging global economy, which in turn threatened national security (Lagemann 2002). *A Nation at Risk* and the slew of national and international reports that accompanied or followed it conveyed the same message—teachers matter, not just in the classroom, but in terms of national economies (e.g. Furlong, Cochran-Smith, and Brennan 2009; McKinsey and Company 2007; OECD 2005; World Bank 2010). This message prompted unprecedented concern about teacher quality almost universally (Furlong, Cochran-Smith, and Brennan 2009) and marked the emergence of a new ‘education policy paradigm’ in the US (Mehta 2013) that focused on teacher quality, defined in terms of students’ achievement, and accountability. The perceived solution was heightened accountability for teacher and student outcomes through close scrutiny, ongoing monitoring, public and highly publicised evaluation and reporting, and the creation of large-scale data systems linking teacher, student and teacher preparation data and punitive measures for schools and preparation programmes that did not measure up to expectations, (Cochran-Smith, Stern, et al. 2016; Cochran-Smith, Piazza, and Power 2013; Lewis and Young 2013).

It is important to note that accountability was not a new phenomenon in the US in education generally or in teacher education during the late 1990s. Rather the emerging era of accountability was part of a larger sea change (Cuban 2004), which cut across education levels – from primary and secondary through higher education – and across professions (Ginsberg and Kingston 2014). The shift was from accountability primarily for inputs, resources, and processes, such as teachers’ credentials, to accountability for what Ambrosio (2013) called ‘auditable’ (or measurable) outcomes representing results, effectiveness, and/or efficiency, such as students’ achievement. Some would describe this shift in educational accountability in simpler terms – from *inputs* to *outcomes*. This is an apt description for teacher education, as we show below.

Teacher education’s accountability era was ushered in the US with the 1998 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA), which was by then, the single most important federal legislation affecting US higher education (Hannah 1996). HEA/Title II stipulated mandatory federal reporting requirements for states and teacher education institutions and provided funding for alternate routes (Earley 2004). This new accountability approach was intensified by the requirements of the Bush administration’s *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) act (Cochran-Smith 2002, 2005; Elmore 2002; Lewis and Young 2013; *No Child Left Behind, 2001*) and exacerbated by the Obama administration’s *Race to the Top* (RTTT) policies and proposed federal requirements that states be required to rank teacher education institutions annually according to metrics established by the federal government, especially measurements of their graduates’ impact on students’ achievement.

In the discussion below, we suggest that US teacher education’s ‘era of accountability’ emerged from five broad developments:

- unprecedented global attention to teacher quality
- a relentless public narrative about the failure of university teacher education
- teacher education conceptualised as a policy problem focused on outcomes
- the teacher education establishment’s turn toward accountability
- education policy framed as the key to redressing inequality

Below we describe each of these developments to provide a sense of how the accountability era emerged and why it took hold so firmly in the US. It is important to note that we
are not claiming that these five developments ‘caused’ the accountability era. Rather we suggest that these five were co-occurring aspects of the emerging accountability era, each shaping but also shaped by the others. As Taubman (2010) points out in his analysis of accountability and standards in education writ large, there are no ‘easy causal narratives’ in this domain.

Unprecedented global attention to teacher quality tied to neoliberal economics

The emphasis on accountability in teacher education emerged as part of the decades-long shift in the late twentieth century from an industrial economy based on manufacturing and material goods to a global knowledge economy based on the production and distribution of information. In the US and elsewhere, the shift to a knowledge society was also a shift to neoliberal economics wherein individualism, free markets, and private good(s) took precedence over other goals (Cochran-Smith, Villegas, et al. 2016). Neoliberal economics favours policies related to privatisation, deregulation, free trade, increased roles for the private sector, and decreased social protections for citizens (Hickel 2012). Underlying neoliberal ideology is a conceptualisation of human beings as rational, individual, economic actors. This viewpoint is consistent with the logic of human capital theory (Tan 2014). According to human capital theory, education is the central source of economic development. This means that the capacity of education systems to meet the demands of the global market is paramount. Tan emphasised that ‘economy-driven education policies,’ which are based on neoliberal understandings of individuals as economic actors, are intended to enable citizens to ‘contribute to production rather than relying on the social welfare state’ (429).

The connection between teacher education accountability, human capital theory, and neoliberalism’s emphasis on the individual as an economic actor is crystal clear in the work of Eric Hanushek, senior fellow at the conservative Hoover Institute and arguably one of the most influential US economists in the area of public education policy. Hanushek (2002) defines teacher quality simply as teachers who produce large gains in students’ achievement. He asserts that the key to effective education policy is accountability in the form of performance incentives for teachers and schools rather than policies that try to change school conditions. Hanushek and colleagues (Hanushek, Peterson, and Woessmann 2013; Hanushek and Woessmann 2015) argue that nothing is more important to the long-run future of the US than the cognitive knowledge and skills (or human capital) of those being educated today. They suggest that enormous financial and security benefits would accrue to US citizens over a lifetime if the country’s inferior education system could be brought to world-class standards through policies establishing effective accountability, choice, competition, and direct rewards for good performance.

It is important to note that neither the human capital paradigm nor market-based education reforms were partisan agendas in the US. Along these lines, Spring (2011) pointed out that presidents and candidates from both US political parties, including Clinton, Bush, and Obama, have used the language and logic of human capital education for decades. Similarly Au (2016) demonstrated that reforming public education through market-based interventions involved the enactment of policies over almost two decades. In the US, these included school choice, vouchers, deregulation of teacher education, decreases in democratic oversight of schools, contracting public school services to private industry, and, most
importantly, high stakes testing, which provided the basis of evaluation of students, teachers, and schools.

Given the purpose and space limitations of this article, we do not offer an extensive critique of the assumptions and assertions underlying neoliberal economics. However, before turning to the next development in the emergence of teacher education’s accountability era, we do mention three critical points about neoliberal economics, human capital theory, and teacher education. First, although the link between a knowledge society and neoliberal economics has come to be considered more or less inevitable in many developed countries (Hickel 2012) and although alternative approaches have been marginalised in the US and elsewhere (Hursh 2007), this link is not a given (Castells 2010). There are competing perspectives, and some education practitioners, scholars, and policymakers in the US and other nations have managed to resist the neoliberal paradigm. Second, we note that the shift to a competitive knowledge economy wherein individualism and private good(s) take precedence over other goals involves a narrow and problematic notion of educational equity, which we take up below. Finally, we believe that a neoliberal and human capital approach to education policy ultimately undermines a democratic vision of society and that market ideology is fundamentally inconsistent with democratic education. We say more about these ideas in the conclusion of this article.

Continuous public narrative about the failure of teachers/teacher education

A second important influence on the emergence of teacher education’s era of accountability in the US was a continuous public narrative alleging that university-sponsored teacher education had failed and was continuing to fail despite reforms. To be sure, this was not the only narrative about US teacher education during this time and it was adamantly contested in some contexts, but the failure narrative was dominant. This narrative was constructed by various individuals and constituencies, including representatives and spokespersons for the US Department of Education (DOE), conservative think tanks, private advocacy groups, leaders from the business community, emerging educational entrepreneurs and reformers, and some education scholars and professionals. These assorted critics were not joined in a formal alliance. But they were united by sentiments consistent with neoliberal ideology and human capital theory, as outlined above, and with the idea of teacher education as a policy problem, discussed below. Given these shared bases, the failure narrative was comprised of different but broadly consistent charges that built on one another and gained momentum from relentless repetition.

In fairness, we acknowledge that university teacher education in the US did indeed have genuine problems during the period we are discussing (and both prior to and following that time period), not the least of which was markedly uneven quality across its multiple and widely dispersed programmes and institutions. But the failure narrative was about something more than calling attention to legitimate problems and debating the evidence. Below we highlight a few of the major themes in the teacher education failure narrative to convey its scope and consistency and to suggest its cumulative power.

- Teacher candidates’ completion of university-based teacher preparation makes ‘no difference’ in the achievement of students (Abell Foundation 2001; Kanstoroom and Finn 1999).
Teacher education programmes have a ‘liberal’ and ‘progressive’ bias (Farkas, Johnson, and Duffett 1997; National Association of Scholars 2005), and they focus on ‘touchy-feely self awareness’ (Schrag 1999) rather than objective knowledge.

The regulatory apparatus for teacher certification and licensure in the US is a ‘broken’ system (U.S. Department of Education 2002), which bars academically able young people who want to teach but don’t want to ‘waste time’ on ‘trivial’ education courses (Hess 2001).

Alternate entry and certification routes are ‘superior’ to university programmes and provide a policy model for improving teacher quality (DOE 2002).

Schools of education do not embrace the ‘science’ of education (Lyon 2002; Walsh, Glaser, and Wilcox 2006) and ought to be ‘blown up’ (Lyon, 2002).

Most teacher education programmes are ‘mediocre’, not up to the job of producing the work force the country needs (Duncan 2009).

Existing reforms don’t focus on ‘what really matters’ for teacher quality – regulatory oversight and accountability for students’ learning and teachers’ effectiveness (Crowe 2010; Deans for Impact 2015; Hanushek and Woessmann 2015).

As these excerpts show, the failure narrative was made up of a potent concoction of contested empirical assertions, normative claims, hyperbole, and politics. This narrative helped to establish a new ‘common sense’ about university-sponsored teacher education in the US (Scott 2016) and was a major part of the rationale for new accountability schemes designed to produce compliance and uniformity across university teacher education programmes. It also paved the way for the proliferation of alternate pathways, new non-profit and for-profit providers, and test-only entry routes into teaching intended to side-step or replace university teacher preparation programmes (Cochran-Smith, Carney, and Miller 2016).

Part of the reason the failure narrative was so effective in the US was that it built on the already strong international consensus that ‘teachers matter’, a phrase that was inflated and repeated endlessly in the policy world by both advocates and opponents of university teacher education (e.g. Darling-Hammond 2000; National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future 1996, 1997; OECD 2005; Sanders and Horn 1998). In the US, the highly-seductive assertion that teachers were the most important factor in students’ achievement was a double-edged sword. This was the case in part because this assertion lived alongside the received wisdom – since at least the time of A Nation at Risk – that teachers and schools were failing. The logic here was crystal clear: if teachers are the most important factor in students’ achievement and US students’ achievement is sub-standard, then US teachers are the culprits, as well as the teacher educators and institutions that prepare them.

**Teacher education as a policy problem**

Concurrent with the two developments above, a third factor that influenced the emergence of the accountability era in US teacher education was the construction of teacher education as a public ‘policy problem’ (Cochran-Smith 2005). When teacher education is defined as a policy problem, the goal is to determine which of the broad parameters that can be controlled by policy makers is most likely to enhance teacher quality and thus have a positive impact on desired outcomes (Kennedy 1999).
The Bush administration’s NCLB act intensified the policy approach to improving teaching and teacher education by ushering in a broad testing mandate for primary and secondary schools and stipulating that all teachers be highly qualified. Coupled with the 1998 reporting requirements of HEA, NCLB also established a new approach to teacher education as a policy problem – high-stakes accountability managed by the states, but mandated and controlled by the federal government (Kumashiro 2015).

The accountability focus of NCLB was sharply exacerbated by the Obama administration’s RTTT policies and funding. RTTT signalled what Hess and McShane (2014) referred to as a shift in policy rhetoric from a demand for ‘highly qualified teachers’ to a clamour for ‘highly effective teachers’. The distinction here is between what some have called teacher quality ‘inputs’, on one hand, and ‘outputs’ or ‘outcomes’, on the other. So-called inputs include teachers’ qualifications, their subject matter knowledge, and the characteristics of their preparation and entry routes. In contrast ‘outcomes’ include teachers’ classroom performance, retention in schools, and – most controversial – evaluation of teacher preparation programmes based on programme graduates’ impact on the learning of their students, using value added or student growth measurement models.

The wording of RTTT funding guidelines, which determined states’ eligibility for major federal funds following the global recession, made the policy shift to outcomes very clear. In a policy report on RTTT funds and teacher preparation, Crowe (2011) asserted that RTTT (2009) guidelines explicitly defined teaching effectiveness in terms of students’ test scores, as it should be. Quoting from the 2009 guidelines, he summarised:

> effective teachers are those whose students achieve acceptable rates of student growth … student growth [is] the change in student achievement … between two points in time … student achievement [is] a student’s score on the state’s assessments …

In short, as Crowe demonstrated, RTTT established that effective teachers were those who raised test scores, a definition perfectly aligned with Hanushek’s economic perspective on teacher quality. To be competitive for RTTT funds, states promised to implement new accountability measures that tied teacher education programme evaluation to teacher evaluation based in large part on students’ achievement as indicated by scores on standardised tests (Crowe 2011; Henry et al. 2012).

The perspectives implicit in the RTTT guidelines were consistent with market-oriented, neo-liberal values and concepts. As Scott’s (2016) analysis of the politics of market-based education reform suggests, this is not surprising. Scott argues that conservatives and neoliberals have dominated the framing of the problem of the schools in the US for decades. They characterise schools as wasteful, inefficient, and inattentive to results, thus exacerbating the failed potential of students and the protection of inefficient and overpaid teachers and school leaders, all resulting in the declining ability of the US to compete globally. Meanwhile, as Scott notes, progressives’ framing of the problem of schools – too much focus on tests, unequal funding, unequal distribution of well-qualified teachers, curricula that don’t include citizenship and democratic education – has been marginalised.

Dominance in framing problems goes hand in hand with dominance in framing solutions. Scott pointed out that under Obama, the federal approach to education ‘emulated venture philanthropy’ (10). That is, its solutions to the policy problem of education/teacher education included competition, the privileging of strategies that ‘work’, an emphasis on private sector funding, and favouring diverse providers such as charter schools and the
participation of private sector actors in the operation of schools. This approach to the problem of teacher education has been very clear during the last decade as more and more new non-profit and for-profit teacher preparation providers have emerged (Cochran-Smith, Carney, and Miller 2016; Cochran-Smith, Carney, et al. 2017), many of which have had funding from venture capitalists and/or private philanthropies (Zeichner and Pena-Sandoval 2015).

The teacher education establishment’s accountability turn

The fourth factor in the emergence of US teacher education’s era of accountability was the teacher education ‘establishment’s’ own turn toward accountability. Although the US teacher education scene is complex and crowded with many newcomer providers, new formers, and new advocacy groups, there are two major national organisations that have been centrally concerned about teacher education policy for the last 70 years. First is the National Council for the Accreditation of Teachers (NCATE), which was the major national professional accreditor from 1954 until 2013 when it merged with the smaller Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) to form the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). The second is the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), which is the major alliance of teacher education institutions in the US. The leaders of these two organisations are often cast as spokespersons for university-oriented teacher education in emerging policy and political developments in the US and thus we treat them here as representatives of ‘the establishment’ (Taubman 2010; Wilson and Tamir 2008).

In 2000, NCATE announced new teacher preparation programme accreditation standards, which were described as ‘a paradigm shift from inputs to outcomes’ (Schalock and Imig 2000) because they required schools of education to provide performance evidence of candidate competence (Cochran-Smith 2001; Wise 1999). The new standards were consistent with the movement to professionalise teaching and with the accountability push by the larger educational establishment (Ambrosio 2013; Taubman 2010).

NCATE’s turn toward accountability was not surprising. In the face of ongoing critique of teacher education’s ‘mediocrity’ (Duncan 2009; Greenberg, McKee, and Walsh 2013), NCATE struggled to redefine itself during the 2000s and 2010s and to avoid what Earley (2000) described as being ‘cast as a culprit’ in American schools’ poor showing on international comparisons. Following the NCATE-TEAC merger in 2013, CAEP announced new accreditation standards. These moved the organisation more into line with the current package of market-based education reforms and intentionally cast CAEP as a bellwether for tougher standards, reflected in elevated teacher candidate selectivity requirements and the demand for evidence of programmes’ and graduates’ impact on student achievement. As importantly, CAEP’s new standards were intended to demonstrate that the organisation, which was struggling with membership and leadership issues, continued to have a relevant role as the one and only national accreditor of teacher education.

Meanwhile AACTE had its own struggles. Taubman (2010) suggested that in the early to mid 2000s AACTE made a ‘rush to support standards and accountability … given the threat of privatisation on one hand and withdrawal of government funding on the other’ (77). While we believe this was largely the case, it is also important to note that AACTE’s paying membership was primarily deans from the same universities and colleges of education that were the butt of critiques and the targets of new accountability policies based on mistrust of the
profession. This undoubtedly influenced AACTE’s attempts to walk a fine line between carrying the torch for the new accountability, on one hand, and questioning the new accountability in keeping with members’ concerns, on the other.

When Sharon Robinson was named AACTE’s CEO in 2005, its banner mission statement became, ‘AACTE—serving learners’, which signalled that the organisation was committed to boosting students’ achievement rather than being concerned only about teachers’ preparation. In response to the Obama administration’s 2011 proposal for new HEA/Title II requirements that would evaluate preparation programmes on the basis of the achievement of their graduates’ eventual students, Robinson said: ‘This is a good thing, to have the Department [of Education] now become a part of our reform effort in teacher education’ (Grasgreen 2011). Robinson’s statement seems intended to convey ownership by the teacher education establishment of the focus on outcomes. However, although the 2011 proposed HEA/Title II regulations were never approved, the even more stringent HEA/Title II federal reporting requirements proposed in 2014 prompted unprecedented opposition from the teacher education community. At this point, AACTE joined with many other professional organisations to oppose the 2014 proposed regulations, which would have evaluated preparation programmes according to their graduates’ impact on students’ achievement. After extensive public comment and debate, the 2014 proposed regulations were finally approved with some revisions in 2016 toward the very end of Obama’s presidential term. They were rescinded just a few months later in March, 2017, shortly after Trump was elected. Lauding the rescindment, AACTE credited its organisation’s ‘tireless advocacy’ opposing the regulations.

Today the accountability discourse is pervasive and normalised both within the university-sponsored teacher education establishment and outside it. To be sure, most university teacher educators define outcomes more broadly than students’ test scores, and many continue to object to teacher preparation programme evaluation based on students’ test scores. Nevertheless it is now a fact of life that US teacher education focuses on outcomes, and there are far fewer questions raised about accountability per se than there were previously.

**Education reform as the cure for inequality**

The final factor we consider in the emergence of teacher education’s accountability era is the belief that education reform is the cure for inequality. What we mean by this is that over time it came to be assumed by US policymakers and others that poverty and income inequality were problems that could be solved by education reform without reforms addressing other social, economic, and political conditions.

Kantor and Lowe (2016) made this argument very persuasively in their essay about the evolution of US social policy since the New Deal. They argued that ever since the Lyndon Johnson presidential era, education reform rather than a robust welfare state was the favoured solution to poverty and inequality. The authors argued that:

> The idea that inequality and poverty are susceptible to educational corrections … has reduced pressure on the state for other social policies that might more directly ameliorate economic distress, but, because education’s capacity to redistribute opportunity has been limited by absence of social policies that directly address poverty and economic inequality, it has fueled disillusionment with public education itself for its failure to solve problems beyond its reach. (38)
Kantor and Lowe argued that the belief that education reform could ameliorate inequality relieved policy makers of the burden for developing other social policies that, coupled with education reform, actually could have reduced inequality. This belief also exacerbated disillusionment with public education and supported the turn away from public schools.

For teacher education, this belief ratcheted up what policymakers and the public expected from teachers and teacher educators. Increasingly in the US and elsewhere, teachers were expected not only to produce a competitive labour force but also to meet rising social expectations and help achieve greater social equity (Furlong, Cochran-Smith and Brennan 2009). The belief that education reform could eradicate inequality also led some people to conclude that anyone who said teachers and schools could not solve the nation’s social problems were educational establishment insiders who supported the status quo, wanted to lighten their own workloads, and simply made ‘excuses’ for the ineffectiveness of schools, teachers, and teacher educators (Hanushek 2002; Haycock 2005).

It is important to note here that – at least rhetorically – nearly all contemporary US teacher education accountability initiatives have as one of their goals promoting equity by ensuring that students have access to good teachers. However what we have found is that underlying many accountability initiatives is what we refer to as ‘thin’ rather than ‘strong’ equity (Cochran-Smith, Stern, et al. 2016; Cochrane-Smith, Baker, Burton, et al. 2017), a distinction that borrows language from democratic theorist Benjamin Barber’s (1984) classic distinction between ‘thin’ and ‘strong’ democracy.

When we talk about teacher education accountability, we use ‘thin equity’ to refer to initiatives that assume equity has to do with individuals’ equal (or same) access to ‘high quality’ teachers, curriculum, and school opportunities. Thin equity’s individualistic focus is consistent with the neoliberal view that human beings are rational, individual, economic actors responsible for taking action for themselves (Tan 2014). A thin equity perspective assumes that assimilation into ‘shared’ school goals is the bottom line goal in the education of minoritized students. In contrast, a ‘strong equity’ perspective acknowledges the complex and intersecting historical, economic, and social systems that create inequalities in access to teacher quality in the first place (Anyon 2005; Gadsden, Davis, and Artiles 2009). A strong equity perspective assumes that equity cannot be achieved by teachers and schools alone. Rather it requires educators working with policymakers and others to challenge the structural and systemic aspects of schools and society that reproduce inequity (King 2006). The idea of strong equity also explicitly acknowledges the racialized nature of teacher education accountability initiatives that focus on high stakes testing to evaluate teacher candidates and preparation programmes. As Au (2016) has argued, high stakes testing regimes have consistently reproduced racial inequality in the US by assuming objectivity and thus masking the structural nature of racial inequality within a neoliberal ideology of ‘individual meritocracy’ (40), which denies the structural and material aspects of racism.

There are many teacher education scholars and practitioners, ourselves included, who work from critical and social justice perspectives that are consistent with the idea of strong equity as we have elaborated it here. But this is not the dominant view operating in accountability policies and initiatives in the US. All five of the developments that we propose have shaped teacher education’s accountability era assume that teacher quality is the single most influential factor in the success of individuals and in national economic prosperity.
Whither the era of accountability in US teacher education?

In the preceding discussion, we have shown that the era of accountability in US teacher education was not precipitated by a singular event or development in the field nor was it the final point in a causally linked chain of chronological events. Rather the accountability era emerged from multiple interrelated and contemporaneous developments, including but not limited to those we have described in this article. The accountability era was part of the larger shift to a global knowledge economy consistent with the belief that teacher quality was the essential determiner of students’ achievement and the fundamental factor in the capacity of nations to compete successfully in the global economy.

We have also shown that the accountability era was not something that was simply imposed on the teacher education community by outside accreditors, state and federal regulators, or reform advocacy organisations. To be sure, there were – and are – large segments of the teacher education community who oppose federal and professional efforts to evaluate teacher education according to the impact of its graduates. There were – and are – many teacher education institutions and individuals who have resisted the imposition of accountability expectations by private organisations with anti-teacher education agendas. For the most part, however, and partly in response to relentless critique and expanding competition from new providers, over time key organisations in the teacher education establishment have come to embrace accountability in ways that are broadly consistent with larger state and federal trends in social policy wherein it is assumed that public education policies, particularly accountability policies, are the best tools for improving teacher preparation and boosting teacher quality.

As we have noted, the five policy, political, and professional developments described above are closely interrelated and interwoven in terms of logic and language, and they were co-occurring in terms of chronology. These developments were shaped by but also reinforced one another. Considering these five developments together helps explain the contexts and conditions within which the accountability emphasis in US teacher education emerged and took hold. Collectively what they have added up to in teacher education over the last two decades is that accountability – of the type we have described in this article – has come to be perceived as more or less ‘common sense’ in teacher education rather than as a policy or professional alternative (Apple 2006; Au 2016; Kumashiro 2012). Part of what this means is that the language of accountability has come to be experienced as a ‘natural’ part of teacher education policy and practice, and the logic and assumptions about knowledge and power that underlie accountability have become largely invisible.

So what is the future of the accountability era in US teacher education? What do we see if we look forward? Given the highly unexpected turn of the US presidential election at the end of 2016, perhaps the most certain thing that can be said about any policy arena in the US at this point in time is that the future is uncertain. Uncertainty notwithstanding, based on Trump’s campaign and other statements and on the Trump administration’s proposed education budget for 2018, it seems reasonable to say that his administration favours more state rights and less federal oversight of education, including teacher education, as well as more voucher plans and consumer choice about schools, which likely will also include more support for charter schools, alternate routes into teaching, and new schools of education unaffiliated with universities (Cochran-Smith, Carney, and Miller 2016). In addition, as we noted above, just a few months into his term, Trump rescinded Obama’s new HEA/Title II
teacher education regulations and also rescinded the accountability regulations of the US Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which is the major federal legislation that funds elementary and secondary education in the US. However beyond rescinding Obama’s education acts (and Obama’s actions in many other policy areas), there has been little indication about the Trump administration’s stance on the neoliberal frames that feed the accountability paradigm. Also, because neoliberal reform is tied to conservative agendas (Apple 2006), there is little indication that the underlying assumptions and ideas behind teacher education accountability will disappear from the national political discourse or decision-making.

Our own position is that, even if we could, we should not abandon accountability in teacher education nor should we champion radical localism, although we believe that all federal, state, and professional accountability policies and initiatives should work from a position of respect for local values and commitments. This may be a time for new ideas about accountability that bring together some educators and reformers with different perspectives about the problem of teacher education and how to fix it. Instead of abandoning accountability, then, we are calling for a new approach—democratic accountability in teacher education—an idea we develop at length in our forthcoming book (Cochran-Smith et al., forthcoming). Democratic accountability is based on three core ideas. First is that teachers and teacher educators need to take intelligent professional responsibility (Crooks 2003; O’Neill 2002; Sahlberg 2010) for students’ learning, including their learning of democratic perspectives and civic skills, such as deliberation and disagreement (Gutmann 1999; Michellil and Keizer 2005), which are necessary for participation in a democratic society. Second is the idea that accountability must be based on a notion of ‘strong equity’ (Cochran-Smith, Stern, et al. 2016), which recognizes the societal and educational systems and structures that produce and reproduce inequality but also acknowledges teachers’ and teacher educators’ roles in challenging these. And finally, we argue that democratic accountability is only possible if structures are in place that support and sustain the ongoing collaborations of the diverse communities of stakeholders involved in the teacher preparation enterprise.

We believe that the future of accountability in US teacher education could build on these three core ideas. Of course this raises many provocative questions about the future, with which we conclude this article. What would it mean if teacher education programmes and pathways were held accountable in ways that were consistent with the democratic project? What would state or national accreditation standards look like if teachers were expected to teach students the skills of disagreement, deliberation, and perspective taking? What might federal/state reporting regulations include if the definition of teacher persistence included persistent efforts to challenge existing school structures and policies that reproduce inequality? What private or public advocacy groups and philanthropists might invest their time and resources in evaluating and reporting to the public about teacher education programmes’ progress toward democratic ends? What if teacher education programmes of all kinds were ranked and rated according to how well they prepared teacher candidates to prepare students to live and work productively in an acutely diverse and divided democratic nation?

We believe there are promising practices in teacher education in the US and in a number of other countries that already get some aspects of democratic accountability right. There is also forward-looking accountability scholarship in teacher education, primary and secondary education, higher education, and the public sector that is helpful. In short, we believe it is possible for there to be a different future for US teacher education accountability and
that we are at a crossroads of sorts. However this will require teacher educators to proactively reclaim the concept of accountability and work with others to build a different future.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Notes on Contributors**

*Marilyn Cochran-Smith* holds the Cawthorne Chair in Teacher Education for Urban Schools at the Lynch School of Education, Boston College, USA. Her scholarship over 30 years has focused on teacher education research, policy, and practice nationally and internationally with special attention to diversity, social justice, and practitioner inquiry.

*Megina Baker* is a researcher on the Pedagogy of Play project at Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Project Zero. She holds a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from Boston College, and teaches courses on play and child development at Boston University.

*Stephani Burton* is a doctoral candidate at Boston College and a research associate at Technical Education Research Centers (TERC) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her research explores the impact of education policies and initiatives on teacher education and students from non-dominant backgrounds.

*Wen-Chia Chang* is an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Measurement, Evaluation, Statistics, and Assessment at Boston College. She currently teaches research methods courses, and her research focuses on theories and practice of evaluation, measurement of teaching practice for equity, and teacher education for social justice. She holds a PhD in Measurement, Evaluation, Statistics and Assessment.

*Molly Cummings Carney* is a doctoral student at Boston College studying teacher education and education policy. Her research focuses on innovation in initial teacher education, online teacher preparation, and equity and social justice in urban schools.

*M Beatriz Fernández*, PhD, is a faculty researcher at Alberto Hurtado University in Chile, where she serves as a director of a teacher preparation program. She holds a PhD in Curriculum & Instruction. Her research focuses on education policy and social justice in teacher education. She founded Alto al Simce, an activist group against K-12 standardization in Chile.

*Elizabeth Stringer Keefe* is a teacher educator and faculty coordinator of Graduate Studies in Autism at the Graduate School of Education at Lesley University. Her research focuses on teacher education and teacher education policy, special education teacher preparation, and teacher preparedness to educate autistic students. She is President of Massachusetts Council for Exceptional Children.

*Andrew F Miller* is the Director of Academics for the Archdiocese of Boston Catholic Schools Office. He holds a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction from Boston College. His research has focused on the intersections of teacher education, educational policy/accountability, and the educational reform movement.
Juan Gabriel Sánchez is a doctoral candidate at Boston College. He studies teacher education and education reform, with a focus on institutional change at the school and classroom levels and its relationship to the reform environment. His dissertation research examines this relationship at a new graduate school of education that combines innovative structures and progressive pedagogies.

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