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teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand



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From preparation to practice: Tensions and connections

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Abstract

The links between initial teacher education, teacher registration and early career learning are problematic. The curriculum and control of initial teacher education is contested and the nature of relationships between the key parties (teachers, providers, and regulatory institutions) is under pressure.

At present, providers of initial teacher education (ITE) in New Zealand prepare beginning teachers and at point of graduation, formal links with the student are severed. This feels unsatisfactory as it creates a division in the teacher professional learning process that, ideally, should be more seamless. Becoming and being a teacher is an ongoing, challenging process that requires continuing professional development. Therefore transition points in the process of becoming and being a teacher need to be as seamless as possible. To ensure greater connectivity in ongoing teacher professional development and learning for beginning teachers, all parties (from ITE onwards) need to take responsibility for developing understanding and respect for the different components of beginning teacher development. That simple statement hides issues of power and control that create tensions that threaten connections and professional respect.

This paper explores the present context and identifies points of tension and connection between the key stakeholders. We argue that these tensions can, without understanding, goodwill and a commitment to the profession as a whole, undermine the development and maintenance of links between ITE, registration and early career learning. The challenge, for all parties involved, is how to mitigate the tensions and enhance respect for all stakeholders committed to the endeavour of teacher learning and development. The authors suggest that new working relationships are needed and identify ways in which the key parties might establish better links.



The tensions

The challenges to ensuring seamless early teacher development and nurturing respectful understandings are structural, political and relational. Criticism cannot be simply attributed to any group or institution alone. Rather, a combination of factors leads to points of tension. Addressing such tensions, outlined in the sections that follow, should not be a case of good people trying to make unsatisfactory systems right. Planned structural, political and relational change built on mutual respect and understanding is needed.

Structural

Structurally there are three broad areas of tension that can, and often do, undermine the connections between preparation and practice. The first of those tensions is linked to the move of almost all initial teacher education (ITE) to universities. The second area of tension is focussed on the control of ITE programmes, their approval and content, and finally, the third area is linked to issues that greater central control of funding generates.

University-based initial teacher education is not particularly well understood by policy makers and, in some instances, the teaching profession itself. Some would say teacher education has “yoked itself to the university, thereby separating itself from the field of practice” (Sykes, Bird, & Kennedy, 2010, p. 466). Others see strength in closer links between theory and practice. In Finland, for example, there is systematic integration of research and practice and evidence-based decision-making. Engagement with a research-focused community of teacher educators is seen as a strength of Finnish teacher preparation programmes (Sahlerg, 2012). In New Zealand, mergers of colleges of education with universities began in 1991, and all former colleges of education have now merged with a university. However, there is still debate about the appropriateness of university-based ITE and a range of alternative providers are well established, particularly in early childhood education. Although most quality assurance indicators such as student evaluations, monitor reports and approval reports give a positive picture of university-based ITE, there can be no denying that there have been changes to programmes that have caused concern for teacher educators and the teaching profession and have raised questions about quality. Teaching time generally, and time for curriculum and subject studies in particular, has been reduced. Many fear that the depth of preparation has been compromised. Approaches to teaching in a university do not always sit comfortably with the teaching patterns established in former colleges of education. This has led to concerns amongst some teacher educators that best practice is not being modelled. Establishing new programmes and new ways of working and understanding is proving to be a long-term process and the balance between the academic and the professional is a delicate one (Zeichner, 2008).

Control of approval processes for ITE programmes tests the boundaries between controlling bodies (with regulatory powers) and institutions that promote and defend autonomy. For New Zealand universities, that autonomy is enshrined in legislation. Programme approval through centralised approval bodies, coupled with increasingly prescriptive requirements set by those approval bodies, has had the effect of making ITE programmes similar to each other and reducing innovation. Yet, ironically, the schools and centres students are prepared for are diverse, and their diversity has been encouraged since the introduction of *Tomorrow's Schools* (New Zealand Department of

Education, 1989). The contrast between the relative autonomy given to schools to develop their programmes within the broad framework of the New Zealand Curriculum and the requirements placed around ITE programmes is quite marked.

It has been argued that the new programme approval requirements outlined in the document *Approval, Review and Monitoring Processes and Requirements for Initial Teacher Education Programmes* (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2010a) reflect public, professional and political concerns regarding the selection of quality candidates, literacy and numeracy competence, and whether there are meaningful links between teacher education programmes and centres and schools. The requirements state that members of the relevant sector must be involved in the selection of teacher candidates, applicants must be interviewed and their numeracy and literacy skills must be assessed by the teacher education provider. Practicum lengths and settings are specified in the requirements, and the New Zealand Teachers Council (NZTC) insists that students who have more than two attempts at a practicum are not able to stay in the ITE programme. Candidates must be visited by faculty who must also be registered teachers. The requirements also hold teacher education providers responsible for preparing graduates to teach the appropriate curriculum, and for ensuring that they meet the New Zealand Teachers Council's Graduating Teacher Standards (2007).

The range of requirements outlined above signifies increased control of teacher education by the NZTC, ostensibly as a means to address concerns regarding the recruitment and preparation of quality teachers. Currently there are tensions between the NZTC and universities related to institutional autonomy as some of the requirements cut across university regulations, such as stating the number of times a candidate can enrol in a practicum course, and specifying entry requirements for overseas applicants. The external regulation imposed by NZTC regarding the preparation of teachers sits uneasily with the concept of academic freedom embodied in legislation (see Education Amendment Act 1990). That legislation established freedom of the university and its staff to regulate the subject matter taught and to teach and assess students in the manner they consider best promotes learning.

Ideally, ITE programmes should be developed by teacher education experts through consultation processes and the links ITE institutions establish with the teaching community. However, it must be acknowledged that tensions often arise and teaching decisions of teacher education institutions are regularly questioned. Tensions are evident between those who promote a technical view of ITE with a focus on a teacher needing to know what works, and those who see teachers needing to integrate theory and practice and take an evidence-based approach to developing their practice. Respect for the knowledge and expertise of all parties seems hard to achieve.

The central funding of our education system brings some certainty and stability but it also brings control and political influence. Initial teacher education and induction and mentoring into the profession are expensive, as is practicum and the need to provide curriculum expertise, particularly in the complete range of secondary subjects. Short-term, ill-conceived cost-cutting measures are often proposed, and underfunding is difficult to address. Competition for any additional funding is often highly competitive and divisive, and can subtly shift a sector's focus as evidenced with the introduction of Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF). Political influence is obvious and well illustrated in two recent developments. In early childhood education we have seen the dropping of the requirement for all teachers to be fully qualified, and the introduction of

‘Partnership’ (Charter) Schools at the primary level comes with a similar proposal. Political decisions such as these may have serious repercussions for the quality and status of teaching in the future.

Political

Over the last decade or so initial teacher education in New Zealand, as in other countries, has come under increasing political scrutiny. Governments have repeatedly looked to education as a way to address social and economic difficulties. In particular, attention is focused globally on developing literacy and numeracy skills as a means of improving the workforce in order to drive economic prosperity (Sahlberg, 2012). This focus on education as a driver for economic development has put initial teacher education firmly under the policy spotlight (Cochran-Smith, 2005).

International rankings on tests such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), which measure student achievement, have become benchmarks for judging the quality of education systems and key drivers for educational reform. While New Zealand scores comparatively highly on such measures, we have the widest gap between our highest and lowest achievers in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010). The so-called long tail of underachievement of Māori and Pasifika students is used by policy makers to justify reform of ITE along with other parts of the education system. In line with their international counterparts, New Zealand politicians and policy makers have, of late, invoked the mantra of teacher quality to explain educational underachievement. The thinking goes something like this: if the quality of teaching is improved then the tail of underachievement will be reduced or eliminated; therefore the system needs to produce better quality teachers; and given that teacher education is responsible for developing quality teachers, initial teacher education must be reformed in order to produce better quality teachers for the education system. Such thinking immediately creates the potential for division and an opportunity for blame rather than cooperation across sectors of the profession.

The notion of teacher quality, a key aspect of the international education reform discourse, is useful for considering current professional and political tensions that are played out in teacher preparation and early career teaching in New Zealand. The examples from policy documents and policy makers’ statements that follow are illustrative of these tensions, particularly when placed alongside the concept of academic freedom.

The New Zealand Teachers Council’s current brief encompasses the approval and monitoring of teacher education qualifications, setting standards for the graduates of such programmes, teacher registration and the maintenance of qualified teacher standards, and responsibility for disciplinary matters. The Graduating Teacher Standards (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2007) and the Registered Teacher Criteria (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2010b) provide insights into what is regarded as a quality teacher in New Zealand. Both documents contain overarching premises regarding education’s obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi and its role in enabling educational success for all learners. These premises indicate that becoming and being a quality teacher in New Zealand requires understanding of culture and equity, and being responsible for promoting learning for all students. Such notions are reinforced in *Tataiako: Cultural Competencies for Teachers of Māori Learners* (Ministry of Education & New Zealand Teachers Council, 2011), which identifies five competencies

that both new and experienced teachers need to have in order to work effectively with Māori learners and their whānau. The emphasis on teaching for social and emotional as well as cognitive learner outcomes is also evident in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007).

In the documents discussed above there is alignment of the view of a quality teacher in New Zealand as being one who has the cultural and pedagogical knowledge, understanding, skills and commitment to teach students in ways that are responsive to their diverse needs and backgrounds. It does appear, however, that a narrower definition of what is a quality teacher in New Zealand is emerging, one that identifies a quality teacher as someone who adds value to students' test scores. The briefing from Treasury to the incoming Minister of Finance (The Treasury, 2011) emphasised that in the face of global economic instability, New Zealand needed to focus on building economic resilience and growth. A "wide and ambitious programme of policy reform" in education was identified as being one way of achieving this, particularly through a "more systematic use of value-added data and a more professional workforce" (The Treasury, 2011, p. 21). The head of Treasury has explained his logic in advocating for major educational reform (Laugesen, 2012b) to address New Zealand's teacher quality problem, as the good teachers must be sorted from the bad ones through the use of student assessment data, and good teachers should be rewarded through performance pay. The head of Treasury sees a direct relationship between teacher quality and economic results: improve one and you will improve the other.

New Zealand is certainly not alone in focusing on teacher quality in order to improve educational outcomes and lift economic development. The Treasury recommendations are aligned with the international discourse about standards, accountability, the uses of data and teacher quality. According to O'Neill (2010), the New Zealand government's decisions are "march[ing] to a teaching policy tune written by Treasury, the State Services and the OECD" (p. 15). O'Neill sees the "OECD discourse providing ample scope for centre-right governments to pursue their periodic ideological crusades" (p. 16).

Teacher education is in a difficult position in relation to the discourse of quality teaching as it is seen by policy makers to be both the cause of and a solution to education problems (Cochran-Smith, 2005). Teacher education is simultaneously criticised for not producing teachers of sufficient quality to address underachievement, while at the same time seen as being the key site for reform in order to improve teacher quality. Cochran-Smith (2005) argues that the focus on outcomes is a trap for teacher education for the following reasons. First, it assumes that the main purpose of education is to produce a workforce that will lift economic growth and contribute to global competitiveness, and so ignores the broader purposes of education in a democratic society. Second, by positing that teachers are the crucial factor in improving pupil achievement, it places the responsibility for improving schools and schooling on teachers and teacher educators alone, and ignores larger societal factors. Cochran-Smith further contends that over the last decade or so teacher education has come to be construed as a policy problem. The theory underpinning such a view is that the implementation of teacher education policy will improve teacher quality and thus impact positively on pupil learning gains. In New Zealand this policy turn can be seen in the policy discourse on National Standards tests of reading, writing, and

mathematics, as well as in the NZTC specification of initial teacher education programme requirements.

The Minister of Education (Laugesen, 2012a) has also talked about using student test scores to underpin a performance pay system for teachers. In 2012, primary schools were required to submit their first set of National Standards data and the fear is that the Ministry of Education will succumb to media pressure to release the data in a form that will, undoubtedly, allow the compilation of league tables. There is a danger that the definition of a quality teacher in New Zealand may soon become one who can raise scores on National Standard tests of writing, reading, and mathematics.

Relational

Everyone has been to school and everyone knows about teaching. Teachers are remembered and talked about long after schooling days are over. It is hardly surprising then that everyone has an opinion about what is wrong with ITE and how to improve the preparation of teachers. As Labaree (2008) says, “Everyone picks on it [teacher education]” (p. 297). He goes on to say, “Teaching is an extraordinarily difficult job that looks easy” (p. 298).

Perhaps the strongest and most enduring link between ITE and teaching is seen in the practicum. The practicum is a key component of initial teacher education programmes. Indeed, to many novice and experienced teachers their school/centre experience is considered to be the most important part of their teacher preparation programme (Le Cornu, 2010; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). This extremely positive view of the practicum in ITE is shared by policy makers. In Australia, a major report (Hartsuyker, 2007) noted that practical experience was consistently valued highly by student teachers, and identified the benefits afforded by practicum as including opportunities to integrate theoretical knowledge and professional practice and have diverse experiences in a range of school contexts with a variety of students under the guidance of experienced and expert practitioners. In New Zealand, the Education Workforce Advisory Report (Ministry of Education, 2010) also highlighted the critical importance of the practicum in teacher preparation programmes.

We believe that there would be a high level of agreement amongst teachers, teacher educators and policy makers with Darling-Hammond’s (2010) assertion that “learning to practice in practice, with expert guidance, is essential to becoming a great teacher of students with a wide range of needs” (p. 40). However, it is also true that teacher educators’ views of the practicum are more ambivalent than those often expressed by teachers and policy makers. Teacher educators tend to position the practicum as being important but problematic, and not all agree that that student teachers automatically benefit from having access to the expertise and practices of their mentor teachers (Ambosetti & Dekkers, 2010). Some suggest that simply providing a practice setting for student teachers is not sufficient, especially given the complexities and challenges of teaching in today’s schools and centres (Hagger, Burn, Mutton, & Brindley, 2008; Haigh & Ward, 2004). Questions have been raised regarding practicum arrangements, with Peters (2011), for example, questioning the practice of randomly assigning student teachers to mentor teachers who may or may not see their role as modelling best practice. Indeed, Sinclair, Munns and Woodward (2005) found that mentor teachers often deliberately contradicted university concepts of best practice by telling students to forget about what is taught to them at the university.

It should also be acknowledged that there are limitations to what can be realistically expected of the practicum. As Northfield and Gunstone (1997) argued a number of years ago, teacher education will inevitably be found wanting to some extent as ITE cannot create or sustain an environment that genuinely equates with the reality of full-time teaching. However, while accepting that the practicum can never be as real as full-time teaching, it could be argued that the opportunities afforded by the practicum to develop and expand student teachers' practice and understandings about the demands and complexities of being a teacher are, in fact, being well utilised.

In recent years, a number of researchers have argued that practicum roles, relationships, and sites should be re-examined. Zeichner (2002, 2010) has long challenged the traditional view of the classroom as the placement site, suggesting that teacher educators should think more broadly about schools as being sites for learning to teach. He argues that teachers should be viewed as full partners in teacher education programmes, rather than as providers of classrooms for students to teach in. Such views contest the way practicum has traditionally been structured, that is, around hierarchical relationships between ITE staff and student teachers, and between student teachers and their associate teachers, where the student teacher is positioned as the sole learner, guided by the teacher as expert (Bloomfield, 2009).

What do teacher educators need to do?

Surely, there can be little disagreement that the ultimate goal of teacher preparation and continuing practice is to develop and sustain excellent teachers. That goal has to be the starting point for discussion and change and the measure of success. Central to achieving that goal must be collaboration, understanding, and partnerships within the teaching profession as a whole. A clear definition of partnership is needed as it has become a term that is often used in conjunction with a desire for efficiency achieved through promoting competition. Connections need to be strong, tensions at least understood, and better still, collaboratively addressed. We must cross our institutional boundaries, engage with our profession, challenge quick-fix ideas, and develop understanding of the complexities of teaching and teachers' work. We have to claim a space for teacher discussions and build respect for one another and within our communities. A divided profession is weak. Communities that don't understand the complexity of teachers' work and teacher education are easily persuaded by seemingly simple plans.

It will be important to identify what is 'good' in our ITE programmes, to celebrate successes and the work of teachers. The perception that teacher education is failing and needs fixing up is partly attributable to teacher education's failure to conclusively demonstrate the effects it has on teacher candidates and on student learning (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). Internationally, teacher education is operating in a policy environment that is riddled with calls for decision-making based on data and robust evidence. Policy makers' views of what counts as valid and reliable evidence have shifted to more scientific measures, particularly statistical measures of impact, expressed through effect size. Teacher education's lack of substantial evidence of this sort makes it vulnerable to calls for reform. Members of the research community (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2005) have criticised such a narrow view of scientific research and argue that there are many important questions in education and teacher education that cannot be answered by causal and correlational studies. It is interesting that many of the

changes recently promoted by New Zealand policy makers (for example, the proposal to increase class size) appear to largely come from one source, a synthesis of meta analyses of what actually works in schools to improve learning (Hattie, 2009). It should also be noted that the data from that source is used very selectively rather than being seen as interconnected and vital parts of a whole.

There is little doubt that the links between initial teacher education, teacher registration and early career learning need strengthening. We need to build a continuum of teacher education. The recent Education Workforce Advisory Group report to the Minister of Education (2010) supported strengthening such connections, stating that, “A stronger link between initial teacher education and classroom practice is required to improve the quality and retention of graduate teachers” (p. 14). The workforce’s focus was on the possibilities of ITE linking into the first two years of teaching so that ITE providers could continue to work with graduates. Such a development could open up the possibility of furthering the focus on problems of practice, working with diversity, and addressing aspects in contexts such as multi-level teaching and working in a rural school, which are all challenging to fit into ITE programmes.

Unlike teacher education provision in some countries, New Zealand ITE programmes are not fragmented with curriculum areas placed in the disciplines, education in schools of education, and practicum devolved solely to schools. We believe that this is a strong point that should be protected. We also hold that ITE needs to strengthen its links to the field of practice. One way of doing this lies in critically analysing and rethinking the purpose of the practicum. If teachers and teacher educators regard the practicum as an opportunity for collaborative endeavour (Groundwater-Smith, Ewing, & Le Cornu, 2007), with the aim of providing powerful sites for student learning in practice (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005) then the key players in the practicum need to work together to rethink practicum roles, responsibilities, and expectations. This is not without challenge as it means confronting the traditional view of ITE provider-school/centre relationships where, according to McIntyre (2009), university knowledge is privileged over practising teachers’ expertise and the focus is ensuring that student teacher practice is aligned with what is taught on campus rather than offering anything new.

Rethinking the practicum within current funding constraints and work demands will be a challenge for teacher education providers and for centres and schools. A recent study of how a university and four primary schools worked together to rethink practicum relationships (Grudnoff & Williams, 2010) indicated that the outcomes were perceived to be very beneficial for student teachers and school and university staff. However, the study also showed that attaining such outcomes demanded intense and ongoing interactions, and large doses of goodwill, between all those involved in the project. The last few years have seen increased demands on centres due to funding changes, on schools because of the accountability and compliance demands associated with National Standards and NCEA, and on teacher education providers through staffing pressures and policy changes. Given these challenges, how much time, resource and goodwill is available to the key practicum players to work collaboratively to rethink and re-develop practicum relationships in ways that meet the challenges outlined by Zeichner (2002, 2010)?

As teachers and teacher educators we believe that it is critical that the frame of conversations about ITE needs to be shifted from the currently dominant neo-liberal

discourse which promotes all issues as economic ones and ITE as being, at least in part, a contributor to the teacher quality problem. If this does not happen it will provide more openings for government agencies to regulate and control our work. Continually being called to account distracts us from focusing on the issues we have raised in this paper, and from working with our partners to address the challenges of preparing teachers to work effectively in increasingly complex and diverse teaching contexts.

Finally, we must promote the profession of teaching. It has been noted that a research-informed knowledge-based approach to ITE in Finland has raised the status of teaching there and ensured that teaching is viewed as a profession—the most highly regarded profession after medicine (Sahlerg, 2012). Teacher educators have to get better at research and publication. Planned programmes of research that focus on initial teacher education are urgently needed. That is work that teacher educators must do and it is the only defensible response to the attacks that initial teacher education is routinely subjected to. Teacher educator's love of teaching often gets in the way of taking a step back and systematically researching practice. One example of a planned research response is a survey developed by the Teacher Education Forum of Aotearoa New Zealand. The survey, available to all member institutions, is a collaborative and proactive response to calls for accountability. The survey, using both entry and exit questionnaires, measures perceptions of the value ITE programmes provide for students and their perception of preparedness at the point of graduation. Such research has the potential to provide a strong platform of evidence from which to engage in discussions with stakeholders in the wider political and policy context.

In the current policy environment there is a strong need for educators to take control of the accountability narrative (Shulman, 2007). Indeed, in America for example, many teacher education institutions are already collecting large amounts of evidence (Ludlow, et al., 2010). Fallon (2006) argues that gathering such evidence will enable the defenders of academically based teacher education to counter criticism from external sources. However, responding to external accountability pressures should not be the only driver for the collection of evidence regarding the efficacy of ITE programmes. Fallon (2006) also refers to the importance of evidence supporting a greater understanding of the effectiveness of teacher education and what he describes as a “moral imperative to improve it” (p. 144), while Ludlow et al. (2010) suggest that such evidence can be transformative for teacher education practices. Indeed, for many New Zealand teacher educators a focus on evidence for professional accountability and the use of evidence to support programme improvement is likely to be a more compelling argument than a drive to meet external accountability demands.

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