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Reclaiming and reframing
teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand



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Editorial introduction: Reclaiming and reframing a national voice for teacher education <i>John O'Neill, Sally Hansen, Peter Rawlins and Judith Donaldson</i>	3
Policy driven reforms and the role of teacher educators in reframing teacher education in the 21st century <i>Diane Mayer</i>	7
Is initial teacher education a profession? <i>John O'Neill</i>	21
Rapporteurs' report: Is initial teacher education a profession? <i>Beverley Norsworthy</i>	33
Teacher education policy in New Zealand since 1970 <i>Noeline Alcorn</i>	37
Rapporteurs' report: Teacher education policy in New Zealand since 1970 <i>Andy Begg and Barbara Allan</i>	49
Towards equity through initial teacher education <i>Dr Airini</i>	53
Rapporteurs' report: Towards equity through initial teacher education <i>Chris Jenkin and John Clark</i>	67
From preparation to practice: Tensions and connections <i>Mary Simpson and Lexie Grudnoff</i>	71
Rapporteurs' report: From preparation to practice: Tensions and connections <i>Monica Cameron and Walt Rutgers</i>	83
What are the characteristics of exemplary initial teacher education programmes in countries similar to Aotearoa/New Zealand? <i>Peter Lind</i>	87
Rapporteurs' report: What are the characteristics of exemplary initial teacher education programmes in countries similar to Aotearoa/New Zealand? <i>Peter Lind, Barry Brooker and Beverley Cooper</i>	101
What should initial teacher education programmes for 2022 look like and why? <i>Jane Gilbert</i>	105
Rapporteurs' report: What should initial teacher education programmes for 2022 look like and why? <i>Letitia Fickel and Julie Mackey</i>	117

What evidence-base do we need to build a stronger theory-practice nexus? <i>Lisa F. Smith</i>	121
Rapporteurs' report: What evidence-base do we need to build a stronger theory-practice nexus? <i>Judith Donaldson and Kama Weir</i>	131
Who should develop initial teacher education policy and why? <i>Judie Alison and Sandra Aikin</i>	135
Rapporteurs' report: Who should develop initial teacher education policy and why? <i>Graham Jackson and Jenny Ritchie</i>	147
Special Interest Group report: Tātaiako: Cultural competencies for teachers of Māori learners <i>Jen McLeod and Pani Kenrick</i>	151
Special Interest Group report: Early Childhood Education <i>Kerry Bethell</i>	155
Special Interest Group report: ICT/eLearning competencies in ITE <i>Mary Simpson</i>	159
Special Interest Group report: Learning languages in ITE <i>Adèle Scott</i>	163
Special Interest Group report: Literacy and numeracy competency of ITE students <i>Beverley Cooper and Bev Norsworthy</i>	165
Special Interest Group report: Inclusive education in ITE <i>Missy Morton</i>	171
Special Interest Group report: Sustainability in initial teacher education <i>Jenny Ritchie</i>	175



Special Interest Group report: Early Childhood Education

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Over twenty people, representing a range of initial teacher education (ITE) providers and agencies, gathered at the Early Childhood Special Interest Group hui to share their views on issues facing the sector. Discussion was far-reaching, covering issues relating to teaching qualifications, ratios, professional development, community-based provision versus privatisation, and the possible impact of national standards. Central to the issues raised was concern around the policy direction the government has been taking in recent years and the implications for the early childhood sector. The discussion then shifted to exploring how to maintain the status of early childhood care and education in the face of such ongoing rapid change, hardships and setbacks. In the time allowed it was felt important for all to have opportunity to speak. Thus the report reflects both a multiplicity of voices and viewpoints and some generally agreed viewpoints such as the need for a stronger collective voice. This report identifies key themes central to the discussion.

Teacher qualifications and ratios in early childhood education

Regret was expressed that the previously set target for early childhood centres to be staffed by 100 percent qualified and registered teachers by the year 2012 was changed in 2011 by the current government. New regulations brought changes seen to be detrimental to children's wellbeing. Participants expressed concern that the current targets for registered staff have been reduced to 80 percent for working with children over the age of two years, and in particular that just 50 percent registered teachers are deemed to suffice for children under two. Given the current research that shows the essential need for responsive, reciprocal caregiving for under-tuos, it is critical to challenge the teacher-child ratio that is currently mandated. Having professional, qualified teachers was argued to be a right, not a privilege, for young children to provide a best possible educational start. A quote from Carr and Mitchell reflects the widely held views expressed: "The Prime Minister has said that 'it is a matter of personal belief as to whether a high proportion of all centre staff should be trained



teachers'. This is not so. It is a matter of an informed and evidence-based educational decision" (Carr & Mitchell, 2012, p. 1).

Teacher qualifications and undergraduate teacher education programmes

All involved in teacher education programmes need to take into consideration the challenges of meeting the needs and aspirations of children and families. Some participants felt excluded from decisions being made around programme development. Discussion centred on the design and delivery of teacher education programmes for the future and the need for those involved to have the opportunity to contribute towards determining the core shape of teaching programmes. This requires shared decisions around what it is graduates need to know and be to meet the needs of the children and families in Aotearoa New Zealand in the near future.

The nature of delivery of programmes was also raised for discussion. At present we have a diversity of options including three-year pre-service institution-based ITE programmes, field-based diplomas and degrees with their centrality of sustained work experience, and one-year graduate diplomas of teaching early childhood education. We need to examine conceptual and methodological frameworks for the quality of future teacher education programmes whilst maintaining diversity of delivery with emphasis on academic rigor, relevant content areas, and producing highly professional graduates.

What are the implications for the sector of the recent growth of graduate diplomas of education and the proposed postgraduate diplomas?

Are postgraduate diplomas of teaching the way of the future and should they be? Concern was expressed that one-year university-based postgraduate teaching diplomas may become the norm and the implications this might have for the sector. One participant, concerned with the possibility of losing qualification parity, argued, "If the government makes the decision to only fund postgraduate level qualifications, institutions will be making their own decisions". Concern was expressed that access to ITE only through university postgraduate programmes would exclude people not confident in their academic ability. Equity issues were raised around the lack of allowances for postgraduate study and that there was no guarantee that higher qualifications will bring higher pay. There is need for clarity about the difference in content and standards between the graduate and postgraduate teaching qualifications. It was recognised that graduates from the one-year programme collectively bring to their studies and future teaching a potentially useful and diverse body of knowledge, experience and insights gained through their undergraduate programme of study. The main concern lay with the proposed postgraduate teaching diplomas becoming funded as the main teaching qualification.

Need for stronger advocacy in teacher education

The group discussed the need to advocate more strongly to ensure our voice is heard in matters of concern. Comments included: "Unless we remain vigilant, much more may get lost"; "We need to adhere to the key principles we believe in and to develop strategies to ensure we are heard more strongly as a sector"; "How we collectively and individually tell the story about early childhood care and education services to policy

makers, when we make recommendations, to Government, to the media, to our associates, to our families, to our children, is crucial”.

Where to from here?

Some initial strategies were proposed and discussed:

- Firstly, it was widely agreed that we need to make better use of the opportunities available to us in our work in ITE to strengthen students’ voices as they are the sector’s future. Teaching must be seen as a profession with professional responsibilities. As individuals and together we need to increase student awareness of the value and importance of collectivism and of becoming an agent for change. At a basic level we need to bring NZEI into our classes and promote student membership.

It was suggested that we need to increase student awareness of the work we do as researchers in early childhood teacher education to make visible the importance of qualifications.

- Secondly, we need to strengthen our voices across the compulsory school sector. We need to build working relationships and contact between early childhood education and schools whilst recognising and respecting our differences. It is important not to strive to be like the primary sector, but to promote Aotearoa New Zealand’s child-centred goals for all children, especially those under eight years of age.
- Thirdly, we need to seek ways to strengthen our collective voices both within our own circles of influence and nationally. Some people in the group talked about how they were making greater use of the media to present our voice.
- Finally, it was felt it was timely to consider how to promote more widely a teacher educators’ research-based perspective for the sector.

References

- Carr, M., & Mitchell, L. (2012). *Qualified teachers in early childhood centres: Do we need them?* Occasional Paper. Available from:
<http://issues.co.nz/greatstart100/Qualified+teachers+in+early+childhood+centres+%3A+do+we+need+them%3F>

