The challenge of changing teacher education

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Chapter 2: The Challenge of Changing Teacher Education

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This article is about the challenges of changing teacher education in Australia. While the ‘problems’ of teacher education have been well documented for over 30 years in the literature, they constantly re-emerge in reports and academic papers globally. This chapter unravels some of the realpolitik that confront change agents. The examples are drawn from both New South Wales and the Australian government levels.

In the last decade in Australia, teacher education has undergone numerous critical reviews (See for example Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training 2007; Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education 2003; Skilbeck & Connell, 2003; Ramsay, 2000). Despite these reviews, however, little on the teacher education front appears to have changed. On a related front the teaching profession’s struggles to cope with a changing world have been documented (See Smith & Lynch, 2010; Fullan, 2007; MACER, 2004; Hargreaves, 2003; Marzano, 2003), and an increasing push from Australian governments for improved school outcomes at both the state and federal level are regular pieces in the national press (See for example: Dillon, 2011; Hattie, 2011; Jensen, 2011; Ferrari, 2007).

A cadre of teacher education commentators call for a rethink on teacher education (See for example, Smith & Lynch, 2010; Hattie, 2009; Dinham et al., 2008; Fullan, 2007; Korthagen et al., 2006; Sachs & Groundwater-Smith, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Bransford-Snowden, 2005). Most pointedly John Hattie, an educational researcher, argues: “the current teacher training model is bankrupt and a disruptive model is needed to show a better way” (2011, p 1). He goes on to say:

… there is a need for more exciting and effective ways to educate teachers across their teaching life. After school sessions, warm tea, and cold seats are a poor basis for learning. Perhaps those claiming to be involved are funded only if they can show, with the teachers that they have demonstrable gains on the students’ learning from the professional development provided.

Parallel to this, technological innovations have affected social communications so that many teachers struggle to stay up to date (Rudd & Smith, 2007; Florida, 2006). It seems somewhat ironic that schools, given their nineteenth century hallmarks, and society form a distinct contrast of life forms, yet the former are supposed to serve the latter (Smith & Lynch, 2010; Hattie, 2009; Fullan, 2007). Commentators offer solutions to such discontinuities by providing a different concept of the teacher’s role: ‘The Learning Manager’ (Smith & Lynch, 2010) and ‘The Teacherpreneur’ (Berry, 2011). Others signal the need for a different education system altogether: ‘Student-centric Technologies’ (Christensen et al., 2011) and ‘One Stop Schooling Shops’ (Fullan, 2007; Cole, 1999). Taken together, these are perhaps canaries for a system of education that is now past its use-by-date.

Broadly speaking, teacher educators and the teacher profession have continued to do what they have always done despite calls for fundamental change (See Hattie, 2011 and 2009; Fullan, 2007, p. 264, Hargreaves, 2003). At the political level and in the bureaucracies that surround education, systems have either ignored or been timid about the need to reform teacher education and teaching. They rest
comfortably on the conundrum that schools and teachers, and in turn teacher educators are able to generate social value and productivity by doing what has always been done (Fullan, 2007). For their part, universities play the game of enrolling yet more undergraduates in conventional largely ineffective programs because they generate enrolment statistics and revenue (Smith and Lynch, 2010). Thus, “graduates are still being hired: if they (teacher education faculties) are failing they are doing so quietly” (United States Teaching Commission Report, cited in Fullan, 2007, p. 275).

Over time, education systems and teacher education have been able to resist or dilute pressures for change by such things such as producer capture, industrial agreements and the nature of the associated reward systems. It appears to us that the teacher education industry is living on borrowed time. As Hattie (2011) and Christensen (2011) argue, a disruptive teacher education model is needed to show a better way.

In 2012, the New South Wales Australia State government launched yet another review of teacher education and related matters under the title of ‘Great Teaching Inspired Learning’ (GTIL) (New South Wales Government, 2012). In his introduction to the discussion paper, the Education Minister queries how well initial teacher education prepares teachers for 21st century classrooms (New South Wales Government, 2012, p. 2). Leaving aside the inherent issues of ‘21st century classrooms’, this query is no stranger to the many commentators and researchers who have examined teacher education during past decades (See Lynch and Smith, 2012; Lynch, 2012; Fullan, 2007; Ramsay, 2000).

While we applaud the NSW minister for his desire to change teacher education and to focus attention on teaching, we are well aware of the many hurdles that such an agenda will encounter. What follows offers an insight into what will constitute the necessary conditions for changing teacher education in NSW.

**Teacher Education in NSW**

In our view, one of the strongest claims for re-shaping schooling and teacher education is the social change argument. Any number of commentators has remarked on how the worlds of life and work have changed dramatically over the past forty years, and that technological innovation coupled with human creativity and entrepreneurial flair, have radically altered domestic and international relations. The digital world has enormous effects on social relations, culture, politics, and of course economic relations. In such conditions, education is a key to being able to live and work in a global society as well as providing opportunities for improving the well being of people in less advantaged locations and environments. Consequently schools and teachers, and by direct association teacher education, come into sharp focus according to international criteria, whether they want to or not (Lynch, 2012).

Despite these environmental changes, which frame every aspect of life and work in Australia, teacher education has remained largely unchanged. There are few rewards or incentives for those involved in teacher education to change what is largely an efficient model for grinding out graduates and creating a lucrative revenue source for universities. There are no formalised feedback mechanisms or accountability measures that check the quality of teaching graduates or of programs that have real teeth. Moreover, these programs represent the supply side economics of higher education, a mode that is increasingly compromised in a highly digitised and global economic environment (Lynch, 2012).

In the context of these remarks, we discuss three aspects of teacher education in NSW as sites for reform: university-based teacher education, an evidence base to teaching and effective teacher education partnerships. We discuss each in turn.
Australian universities over past decades have demonstrated neither the desire nor the capacities to change their approaches to teacher education. This is a reflection of the current university funding model, accreditation body requirements and the lack of accountability in the teacher education industry for the effectiveness of programs to graduate effective teachers. To reiterate, the system lacks either incentives or criteria for universities and teacher educators to change their approaches to teacher education. We can cite only one known example where graduates of a teacher education program were evaluated and compared to others from different programs in the entire history of teacher education in Australia (Ingvarsen et al., 2005).

To be fair, the reward system for university-based teacher educators is tied to the competitive university research output economy. Research interests and procedures rest with individual teacher education faculty. Arguably, the bulk of the research produced by educational researchers has marginal relevance for the advancement of teaching or teacher education, in spite of its excellence according to disciplinary, peer and other criteria. It is not surprising then that teacher education is heavily concerned with theoretical discussions drawn from disciplines such as sociology that severely chastise attempts to focus on teaching and improving school achievement outcomes. This environment can and does lead to an over emphasis on the theorisation of teaching and associated ideologies at the expense of the practice of teaching (Smith and Lynch, 2010).

In summary, teacher education is a seemingly impregnable fortress tenaciously defending its ground without the reflexivity to appreciate its diminishing status as the new conditions demand new solutions to old problems.

An Evidence Base to Teacher Education

It is apparent from the teacher education literature that much of what constitutes teacher education in Australia is devoid of an evidence base about what actually “works” when the aim is to graduate expert teachers (Smith and Lynch, 2010; Fullan, 2007).

There is an accumulating database of well-researched teaching strategies that can be properly called essential professional knowledge for teachers. It is analogous to the knowledge that nurses, doctors and pilots use to prepare for practice. The important point here is that this accumulating knowledge is generated by theory-based research on how people learn best as an effect of skilful teaching (Hattie, 2009).

With all of the dangers of over-reaching the point, teacher education staff model work in an environment where approaches and content are determined by individual lecturers. While degrees are stringently structured by external criteria prescribed by accreditation agencies, the four-year undergraduate BEd program for example can have as many approaches to teaching and education as there are faculty. Some see this proliferation as a rich, educative environment.

Others, particularly reformers, see it as a wasted opportunity for faculty to present a strong emphasis on teaching and a language of instruction that graduates can carry as evidence of their expertise in teaching. The common research finding that teacher graduates find little of value in their university education studies has to be interpreted against a four year experience of grand social theories, ideological standpoints on such things as race, class, and gender, learning and teaching and ‘old-hand’ teaching tricks, offered in fragmented programs (Lynch, 2012, Lynch and Smith, 2012, 2013).

This enormous set of bits and pieces is reinforced by school practicums that reflect the view that every
teacher has their own approach to teaching. New teachers are compelled to adopt a *bricoleur* approach to teaching, where double guessing the assessment system is the paramount concern (Hatton, 1989). Rarely are student teachers or their in-school supervisors made accountable for the new teacher’s capacity to teach. Handelsman et al. (2004, p. 521 cited in Kirschner et al, 2006, p. 84), who, when discussing science education, asked: “Why do outstanding scientists who demand rigorous proof for scientific assertions in their research continue to use and, indeed defend on the bias of intuition alone, teaching methods that are not the most effective?

In this respect, teacher education unwittingly operates in a data-free zone shaped and driven by folklore and sustained by mirror-image thinking about teaching in the schools. The images later appear in the accreditation documents used by state and national authorities as they tap into the ‘experience’ of classroom teachers and teacher educators (Lynch, 2012).

(3) The Teacher Education Practicum
Like all vocational courses, teacher education relies on employers and the associated profession to provide the practical experiences required for graduation. At the centre of such a circumstance in teacher education is ‘the practicum’. The teacher education literature is rich with findings about the problematic nature of ‘partnering with schools’ to deliver teacher education programs (See for example; Moran, et al, 2009; Fullan, 2007; Smith, 2000). As Spendlove, Howes and Wake (2010, p. 67) note, “Generally a polarised view exists where school experience focuses trainees very much on day-to-day pragmatics of working in school classrooms while staff in HEIs attempt to provide the theoretical basis to underpin and interpret these school-based activities”.

This kind of situation is prevalent, indeed conventional, in the Australian context, where most university/school-based teacher education arrangements today are primarily managed by a university ‘teacher education faculty’. The schools in this model are recipients of already digested policies and procedures that, at the local school level, have token validation by committees consisting of academic and school staff. Teacher education accreditation agencies provide the authority for such arrangements through the tiers of compliance procedures now required by governments at both state and national levels. The management of teacher education programs, the maintenance of the ‘school-university relationship’ and the organisational logistics fall to the university alone (Moran, et al, 2009; Fullan, 2007).

An effect of the highly theorised and disconnected nature of teacher education is that the practicum comes to be viewed as an ‘add-on” despite its arguably important role in the preparation of teachers. This ‘add-on’ effect means the practicum is often disconnected from the real industrial and educational life of schools and other places of teaching. Student teachers struggle to “survive” rather than mastering a pedagogic framework endorsed by their university lecturers and school mentors alike. “Partnerships” with schools are more often than not token arrangements to enable a teacher education faculty to gain practicum entry in schools for student teachers. This situation reflects the logical dislocation of conventional teacher education programs that lack priority for the *in situ* aspects of teaching. The overarching tragedy is that while teacher education is not accountable for its graduate outcomes, there is an unchallenged and near universal belief that new teachers learn how to teach when they begin work as teachers. Teacher education research agendas fail to ask critical questions in this area that would lead them to alternative framing of old obstacles (Lynch and Smith, 2012).

**What Needs to Change**
Drawing on our previously published works into what works in teacher education (See Lynch, 2012; Smith and Lynch, 2010) there are two *essential* attributes of an effective pre-service teacher education
program: (i) An integrated, coherent approach to “teaching” throughout the program and (ii) Graduates who are able to demonstrate effective teaching capability on graduation. We argue that all else is commentary. With these points in mind a teacher education reform agenda emerges that has five necessary pre-requisites:

(i) An agreement on the contents of the teacher preparation program and how it is implemented by university, school leadership and teaching staff. Minimally, there must be a shared language of instruction and a shared mode of implementation for which all parties are responsible and accountable.
(ii) A program-wide course content emphasis on “pedagogy”. That is, curriculum matters such as converting knowledge to teachable chunks, assessment, reporting, generating and interpreting student achievement data, progress, performance standards, codes of conduct and so on should be premised on optimising school student achievement outcomes by effective teaching.
(iii) Support for pre-service teachers by coaching, mentoring, and guided implementation provided by skilled professional educators who are part of the agreed program (as in i.). Proliferation of approaches should be on the ‘risk’ list rather than being applauded.
(iv) Student teacher performance evaluated by teaching standards that mandate effective teaching in contrast to those which set out the attributes of the ideal teacher. Similarly, teacher performance should be framed in the same way.
(v) Pre-service teaching programs should be based on “effective teaching outcomes” in contrast to prescribed time periods for accreditation purposes. This would allow institutional partnerships (i. above) to implement programs that meet prescribed outcome requirements without being placed in an artificial straightjacket drawn from a particular ideological perspective on teaching education and teachers. There is no evidence that “doing time” for instance contributes to a prospective teacher’s knowledge and skill base for effective teaching performance. An accreditation agency should have mandatory quality checks on the graduates of programs rather than insisting on front end busy-work that requires enormous energy and resources to provide.

In coming to the point of setting an agenda for what needs to change in teacher education in NSW, it becomes apparent that a number of governmental constraints are exerted on the above prerequisites and which, ironically, have the capacity to significantly impede a government’s own agenda, not to mention those of reformers. In our estimation the teacher education accreditation process in NSW is a good place to start.

Teachers Education Accreditation in NSW
The development of teacher education programs in NSW and elsewhere in Australia is wholly controlled by the accreditation process established by law (New South Wales Institute of Teachers, 2006). We have no argument about such a mechanism “in principle”. However, if it is believed that university teacher education programs are a fundamental mechanism for improving student outcomes and boosting Australia’s current international education performance trajectory, and in turn, that reform in this arena could be scaled across the education system to achieve a wide scale shift in school outcomes, then the content of the accreditation requirements need urgent attention. For example, the following statement of intent in our view misses the point.

The Institute supports quality teaching in all NSW schools. Its charter is to advance the status and standing of the teaching profession.1

1 See http://www.nswteachers.nsw.edu.au/Initial-Teacher-Education/ITE_Program-Requirements/
That is, the intent should properly be “Its charter is to optimize student achievement levels in NSW schools by continually improving effective teaching performance”.

The importance of such a shift in emphasis can be identified throughout the Policy and Procedures for the Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in NSW document. All such programs need approval to operate and must conform to a set of standards, viz:

An approved course means an initial teacher education program approved by the Minister under the professional teaching standards (Section 28). (Emphasis added)

Again, there is no argument here in principle, but consequent statements constrain the degrees of freedom of program developers. They also ensure that every program has the same look and feel, a joy for the regulators, but one would have thought a threat to the program content proliferators in university-based teacher education programs.

Approval of an initial teacher education program is based on an assessment that the program’s structure, curriculum content, assessment and professional experience components enable graduates to meet the professional teaching standards as approved by the Minister (Sections 19 and 20). (Emphasis added).

the Graduate Teacher Standards are an essential component of curriculum for all initial teacher education programs approved by the Institute; (Emphasis added)

and,

and all significant curriculum development processes relating to initial teacher education programs to be approved by the Institute, include input from practising teachers; (Emphasis added)

The “standards” to which the policy refers are set out by AITSL. Under “Graduate Teacher Standard #3—Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning”, “teaching” or the “how” of teaching, is left untouched. Almost anything that describes “teaching” would pass muster in wording that conceals while endorsing the “thousand flowers” approach to teaching. This is the very approach that leads to unsystematic, ineffective teaching and ordinary student outcomes, despite the accumulating body of knowledge about teaching strategies that work best.

The accumulating research on effective teaching shows that not all teaching approaches used by experienced teachers are equally effective in achieving desired student achievement outcomes. Teacher education programs ought to ensure that their graduates know and can use such strategies as minimal requirements.

Under Program Standards # 4 and 5, programs “must be sequenced coherently to reflect effective connections between theory and practice” and “Providers have established enduring school partnerships to deliver their programs, particularly the professional experience component” respectively (Emphasis added).

These requirements effectively reinforce the conventional teacher education model by raising the long-standing “theory-practice gap” but doing nothing about it. There are no substantive suggestions about what is meant here. However, the “their programs” inadvertently exposes the underlying ideological

position and acknowledges the “us” and “them” relationship between universities and schools that has been a source of constant criticism for decades. 21st partnerships do not work with top down prescription. The “partnership” concept without a working partnership between all interested parties is at best, token.

The research-based knowledge is that successful teacher education, the graduation of effective teachers, is no longer possible in the token model. School leaders and teachers do not like it. In increasing numbers, school leaders, as their power and authority build-up, will make strategic judgments about whether or not to enter lop-sided pseudo partnerships with universities for practicum purposes. Their concern will be “What is in this for my school and my strategic plan” (Turner, 2012). Universities will have to think hard about they can contribute to such challenges.

Moreover, Program Standard 5.6 states that:

- Providers require that the supervised teaching practice:
  - mandates at least a satisfactory formal assessment of the program’s students against the professional practice elements of the Graduate Teacher Standards as a requirement for graduating from the program (Emphasis added)

“Satisfactory” is clearly a category that has numerous meanings. The standard would be more pertinent if it specified what was required of graduating teachers in respect to effective teaching. As already indicated, there is no guarantee that graduates in such a regime can demonstrate effective teaching capacity and it follows, schools may have to retrain “satisfactory” graduates who are unable to do what they are employed to do, namely teach effectively.

The real politik though, is that Schools of Education and Vice Chancellors can justify “satisfactory” teacher graduates because they apply for university places, graduate and some get jobs irrespective of their exit quality. Universities receive commonwealth funding for them irrespective of the outcomes. Teacher education is therefore inextricably implicated in the slipping NAPLAN and PISA performances of schools and teachers, yet deny accountability.

The point of these details is that the entire edifice of state and commonwealth accreditation reinforces the conventional teacher education model in a watertight regime that links a conventional program model, to standards which do not prioritise “teaching” or specify research-based knowledge about teaching, and in which the criteria for graduation avoid a requirement for demonstrated teaching performance.

This edifice is reinforced by the requirements of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) that places a time-based structure on university qualifications that is heavily weighted to research and academic career tracks culminating in the doctorate. This constraint does not necessarily contribute to the production of quality teachers.

Solution

The accreditation edifice is, in our view, important and should be retained. However, if the goal is to lift school performance, it will take a reform of pre- and in-service teacher education. It will take more than money. It requires a thorough reform of “what” teacher education priorities are and “how” they are implemented.

1. The initial starting point is a complete review and re-write of the “standards” framework content so that the standards place high priority on effective teaching rather than the attributes of the ideal teacher. Such an approach includes a robust model for university-school partnerships that embody real-world
criteria for how professional partnerships operate. The Teaching Hospital model, reflected in a “Teaching School” approach offers a major turn-around for preparing effective teachers. Reform of the required standards alone would radically alter what the NSW Minister signs off on when being advised by the NSW Institute of Teachers.

2. The membership of the NSW Institute and its network in teacher education institutions and schools represent the conventional model. In parallel to the reform of standards, this membership and its networks require replacement or at least a majority membership by those who understand the world from a “teaching” perspective and are actually interested in raising the standard of school student achievement by changing the priority given to teaching and the preparation of teachers.

3. There are some IR issues to do with the coaching, mentoring and role of student teachers in Teaching Schools that need attention. It is important that student teachers undergo an internship in Teaching Schools and that their status is one of “Permission to Teach” or similar and that they are paid for their work (e.g. .5 of a beginning teacher salary).

It is also desirable for the status of the profession and for the development of an effective teaching culture that practising teachers have a Masters Qualification Bar somewhere near the middle of their salary scale. The uplifting and refreshing of teacher professional knowledge could be directly influenced if the Masters is required of teachers and if they could undertake the qualification in a work setting. There are implications for the salary scales and position descriptions of school leaders and expert teachers here.

So what do we make from all this?

It is clear from our discussions that teacher education appears an intractable problem for Australian society. Coupled with this, there are few rewards for teacher education academics to pursue whole scale reform, which further exacerbates the problem of teacher education. The system of university-based teacher education also comes into focus, as does the Government’s role in how teaching and teacher education is organised and regulated. However this does not mean all hope is lost. As indicated, previous strategies such as reviewing the content and structure of teacher education program accreditation, which puts a clear emphasis on ‘teaching’ and ‘teaching performance’, appear to make sense, and we believe such strategies form a realistic beginning to the generation of authentic and relevant change.

Reference List


