



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Summary

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I submit that what is taught as knowledge of teaching in universities has been the principal brake on improving the quality of classroom teaching..

The fundamental problem is that the knowledge basis of teacher education taught in universities has been dysfunctionally derived from other social disciplines, so the study of education has never become a coherent academic discipline in its own right, but exists as a collection of topics developed in other disciplines such as psychology and sociology. These are referred to here as the 'parental disciplines' that have given birth to the '~ of education subjects' which constitute the bulk of the academic content of university teacher education.

This has led to a serious theory-practice gap in teacher which is actually the result of a more fundamental theory-theory gap* — that is a disjuncture between knowledge produced in the '~ of Education' disciplines', and teachers' knowledge of what they do in their practice: their understanding and explanations of how and why what works in their class rooms, does actually work in their classrooms.

To achieve excellence in teacher education and thus in school learning, this submission outlines what needs to be identified, described, and researched into a body of knowledge, perhaps called educology, that can more usefully be taught in universities and schools.

What that might look like and how it might be done is outlined in the submission.

* These gaps were discussed in Tripp D H (2014) Theory and practice in teacher education 2: Knowledge interests, Section 1.3 of submission to the Australian Government Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group's Inquiry into teacher education, but were not referred to in the published report.

Main submission

Bridging the theory-practice gap in teacher education: towards educology*

*Note: I use the term 'Educology' because education is one thing, the study of it is another.

Introduction

The major problem in teacher education is how to overcome the structures that have kept theory separated from practice in teaching and teacher education.

Over the past 3 or 4 decades it has become increasingly clear that school systems have not been meeting all of the needs of their students or society. Classroom teachers, being easy targets and very visible as the point of delivery, have far too narrowly been blamed for perceived failings in the whole system. There is, however, strong evidence that teacher education has been failing teachers, schools and the system in various ways for a number of years, and this has now become a major obstacle to improving the quality of classroom teaching and learning in this country — universities simply do not provide enough of what teachers need to practice their profession.

A long-standing and hugely intractable reason for this is that teacher education has never developed as a coherent discipline, but has remained a field studied and taught by those already trained in other disciplines. Thus teacher education courses have remained a loose association of units comprised of topics drawn from psychology, sociology, philosophy, curriculum, politics, history, statistics, and so on. These can be called the '~ of education subjects', and their units are designed and taught by academics whose higher degrees and research interests might appear to be based in knowledge of education, but are actually based more on the knowledge interests of the original disciplines than they are on the practicalities of classroom teaching and school management.

Conflict resolution, for instance, is a glaring example because classrooms are full of conflict: whenever a child wants to do something they shouldn't, or doesn't want to do something they should, there's conflict; and when 30 individual children are all being required to do the same thing in the same place with the same materials at the same time, there's bound to be someone in conflict with something or someone every minute of the day.

There are frequent mentions of the importance of teachers learning conflict resolution skills relevant to classroom teaching and learning in reports and teacher standards specifications. But according to the Australian Government (2006) Survey of Final Year Teacher Education Students, only 23% were identified as having undertaken units that included anything on any kind of conflict, and that number included both student-student and student-teacher conflict. My own (2014) random

look at 7 university Australian Schools of Education initial teacher education courses, found only one with a dedicated unit (in a 2 years Masters ITE course).

The 2014 cumulated Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) conference database showed how highly teacher educators regard conflict resolution: there was just one (2000) paper indexed as being on conflict resolution in classroom management, but over 600 indexed by 'motivation'. It's not just that the concept of motivation is problematic (and irrelevant to teaching when taught as 'intrinsic good/extrinsic bad' as it generally is in teacher education) , it's the staggering degree of difference in the amount of attention paid to the two concerns, especially when conflict resolution is essential to a safe learning environment without which any kind of motivation conceived and presented by teachers is unlikely to make much difference to learning outcomes.

It seems that conflict resolution is not being taught to teachers because it's relatively not much theorised or taught in Psychology or Sociology. Similarly, although classroom teachers' attitudes, disposition and people skills override anything else they may do to facilitate learning, very little attention is given to those characteristics in either on-campus or in-school learning. It is this kind of mismatch between the needs of the system and the current provisions of the universities that is driving national and State moves towards locating more teacher preparation into the schools and thus away from the universities. Funding pressures on universities have so exacerbated this trend that very few academics now regularly enter school classrooms as part of their job.

These combine to exacerbate the theory-practice problem because few if any classroom teachers are sufficiently informed about what their practicum students have learned at university, let alone keeping themselves up to date with relevant research, to act as mentors in anything other than for their own current practices. This puts a huge brake on new and improved practices being introduced to and becoming normalised in schools.

To simply sideline the universities rather than to improve their contribution is a serious waste of potential and money, but major changes are necessary for university-based teacher educators to make well-informed contributions: they need to spend time observing and mentoring their students and other teachers in classrooms so they can then draw on the experience to situate academic teaching and learning in students' own (and therefore, authentic) practicum experiences. Without that they are unable to utilise the powerful energy of the emotional dimension of the experience, another key area that has been much neglected in research on learning.

Competency-based learning is another approach that has gained some traction in teacher education, but it is easy to show why professional practice cannot be

meaningfully broken down to sets of competencies as in trades' work — the number of variables in complex social situations mean we can never be certain of the outcomes of a strategy prior to using it, which is why we speak of teacher education rather than teacher training. This does not mean that it is not possible to identify and teach sets of strategies that professional teachers can use routinely in their practice; it means that because the outcomes of strategies in social situations are notoriously unpredictable, teachers have to use their professional judgement about which strategy is most likely to work well in any given instance, and exactly how to use it.

How else can teacher education be changed to meet the needs of teachers?

Teacher mentors talk mainly in terms of what are generally referred to as 'tips for teachers' —

- Break instructions down into manageable chunks.
- Start new learning from what the students already know and can do.
- Avoid escalating minor incidents into major power struggles.
- Get the student's account of what happened, and their understanding of your response to it.
- Be clear about your expectations and their responsibilities (but stop thinking that means Rules, Rules, Rules).

Understanding these can form a practice-relevant basis for teacher education courses.

Such tips are in fact suggestions for strategies; strategies seldom have just one function and also they implement theories and reflect cultural and educational values. For example, the tip to 'be consistent' involves:

- A strategy to use to be consistent (eg. '3-strikes': warn, warn, consequence).
- A function of consistency is to establish 'normality' through routines.
- Psychological theory validates consistency by explaining the need for routines, how reinforcement works, and how an emotionally safe learning environment assists learning.
- Some educational values in being consistent are that it is efficient, socially just, and helps to reduce stress which all contribute to a safe learning environment.

When tips for teachers have been developed in such a way, I refer to them as 'principles of practice' because they are principled guides to action; that is, they are general recommendations for action, and they are also 'principled' in the sense that they are validated by experience, theory and educational values.

Analysis of critical incidents in classroom interaction shows that a teacher may be following several principles of practice in a single exchange. For example, a teacher was using a '3-strikes' strategy with a child who was annoying her neighbour. After two warnings the teacher told her to move, but the child pleaded, saying, I won't do it again, and the teacher responded:

It's too late for that now, Jill. I did tell you twice, didn't I? So you can either move to the other end of the table for the rest of this lesson; or if you don't want to do that, you can leave the classroom now and finish your work after school tomorrow. It's your choice.

This is not just an example of consistency in discipline; whether the teacher consciously knows it or not, it also shows the implementation of several other strategies:

- Listen to the child's view
- Show you've heard
- Explain your decisions
- Give children some autonomy
- Demonstrate desirable behaviour

These are the components of a teacher's professional practical knowledge, and all such strategies can be analysed to become principles of practice in the same way as 'be consistent'. Taking the first two as further examples:

The following analysis of the incident shows how easily teachers' professional-practical knowledge can be expressed as principles of practice. Note that psychological and sociological theory is used to explain how the educational values are achieved, and a method for practitioner research is illustrated in use. Note also that such incidents do not so much link theory and practice as incorporate them in a single superordinate entity — the principles of practice format locates theory (as propositional knowledge) and practice (as experience, knowhow and procedural knowledge) in a single, holistic knowledge object, so theory is never divided from practice, and the theory-practice gap disappears.

Table 1 Principle of practice components of a critical incident

(see as table on

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/David_Tripp/publication/299855227

In short, principles of practice incorporate teachers' professional knowledge as a combination of facts, concepts, explanations and skills, that is, 'knowing that', 'knowing why' and 'knowing how'. Thus principles of practice can embed theory of the '~ of education subjects' in the context of real events in teaching that illustrate examples of good practice.

Basing teacher education on teacher knowledge

First, we need recognise that teaching the ‘~ of education subjects’ as separate subjects in on-campus courses and leaving the students and untrained teacher mentors to implement the implications of these in their classrooms does not, and cannot, work within current structures and staffing.

Second, we need to reverse the priority currently given to researching and teaching the content of the ‘~ of education subjects’ and base the construction and content of teacher education courses (and thus academics’ research priorities) on knowledge of teaching from the analysis of successful teacher practices so that the rationales for quality teaching practices are drawn from what works for teachers and students.

The time taken teaching theories of education derived from other disciplines must cease to displace the really essential teaching of skills such as managing conflict, emotional intelligence, student resilience, teacher self-knowledge, and how to treat students with appropriate care and consideration and understanding of who they are.

This will begin the long overdue re-orientation of the knowledge base of teacher education.

Moving on, then, the following table presents a summary of what that might look like if it were to prioritise teachers’ knowledge of practice over that of other disciplines.

Table 2 The 5 components of educological procedural knowledge (2017d)

(Earlier version on: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312332186>; This version formatted as table available from the author)

Teacher self-knowledge Teachers’ procedural knowledge Teachers’ construction of their procedural knowledge The products of teachers’ procedural knowledge Teachers’ propositional knowledge of procedures

Teachers’ understanding and management of their personal and professional qualities

[such as their history, beliefs, desires, traits, abilities, skills, knowledge, experience, values, and ethics].

How to create and maintain a productive teaching and learning relationship with students. Learning and understanding students, their individual and group characteristics, and how best to challenge and support them. An effective, physically, mentally and emotionally safe learning environment to facilitate the achievement of desired outcomes. Responsibilities, legalities, ethics Social contexts, systems & cultures

Child development & difference

Affect, cognition & learning

Learning leadership & classroom management.

How to ascertain what the students already know and need to learn next. Diagnosis
An appropriate curriculum Aims, purposes, rationales, content, and processes for the construction, delivery and assessment of teaching and learning.

How to select and design, sequence and combine, learning content, materials, activities, and assessments. Strategic planning

How to manage classroom learning. Analysis of experience with — situations & contexts, teacher actions and outcomes, student attributes tasks, outcomes, rewards. Intended and unintended learning outcomes

How to know which students have learned what. Assessment of students' performance and development. Student learning profiles — their abilities, traits, and achievements.

How to assess and improve the quality of teaching and learning performances and their outcomes. Analysis of student progress, feed-back, reflection, action learning and academic study. Evaluations of and improvements of teaching and learning methods, performance, and results Methods of evaluation and performance improvement.

Theoretical rationales and ethical justifications of teaching practices in use.

How might this curriculum best be developed and taught in universities?

Briefly, as an on-campus teaching example —

1. students observe and journal incidents they experience during their school experiences;
2. they discuss these with the school mentors and hand them in for academics' feed-back which is given as principles of practice and their components; this feed-back is then discussed with their school mentors
3. these developed incidents are then used on campus to illustrate what students need to know and understand about their classroom experiences.

This process means that when a theory, value or strategy is discussed in a university class, there are a number of illustrations of it being used which are then available for exemplification and discussion.

Students should therefore be in schools at least 1-2 days a week throughout their course so that they can bring observed incidents to class for discussion and the tutor to analyse. The incidents will then present opportunities to teach the functions, theory and values of each principle of practice in real-life experience.

Analysed incidents can then be archived to build a new knowledge base for teacher education and research.

However it is used, that method harnesses two powerful drives for learning: the students are learning at their point of need, and because the content for analysis is students' real experiences of teaching, they have a strong emotional attachment to learning more about and from them.

Towards an educological initial teaching qualification

To summarise the problems addressed here, everything we know about professional learning indicates that teacher educators need to be able to work with students' observational and trial teaching experiences throughout their course, but the universities and State Departments of Education have yet to come to terms with the fact that undergraduate teachers' currently learn their profession more through untrained school mentors on practica, and then in their early years post-qualification by reflection on trial and error, than they do from the largely theoretical courses in the 'of education subjects'; yet we continue to try to prepare students to teach mainly through such units. This has to change.

First, we need to ascertain the current composition of university teacher education courses and teacher educators' teaching commitments and research interests in order to see the extent of the current problems with teacher education. For example, the following data on teacher educators is essential —

- The topics of their graduate dissertations
- What they regard as their 5 most significant publications.
- The topics of their supervised graduate students' dissertations 2008-17.
- The annual amount of time spent in classroom supervision of student teachers 2014-6
- Their teaching of and publications about topics principally dealing with the school curriculum, classroom teaching strategies, educational values, or learning theory.
- Their contributions to the orientation and supervision of school mentors.
- Their universities' provision of opportunities for their professional development.

Such information would give some indication of the extent of the problems outlined in this submission, and exactly what needs to change.

Second, to shift the balance towards developing practitioner knowledge, teacher education requires an extensive repackaging of undergraduate teacher education courses. This must involve continuing to shift the context of teacher education from

the concerns of the “parental disciplines’ that have engendered the separate academic ‘~ of education subjects’, to educological topics such as curriculum, classroom management, catering for cultural and individual differences, diagnosis of learning difficulties, managing group learning, collegiality, professional development, homework, bullying, school-community liaison, literacy and numeracy throughout the curriculum, and so on.

The components of teacher professional knowledge shown in Table 2 could assist that process by providing an initial overall plan for what is needed to develop a coherent and relevant curriculum for initial and further teacher education courses.

Third, course content should be based on principles of practice, and because theory and practice are integrated into a single template in the principles of practice format, one of the main divides between theory and practice (that of knowledge of theory and knowledge of practice), would be extensively bridged.

Fourth, if the other two main theory-practice divides (between different staff and sites of learning) were remedied, then the theory-practice problem would largely disappear. So university academics and school teachers need to spend time working together in each other’s classrooms to learn from each other to bridge university-school gaps and develop the procedural knowledge units together.

Fifth, though such developments would require new funding, teacher education is simply too important to the well-being of society not to be at least adequately funded.

References

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