

The Promise and Challenge of University Based Teacher Education



Ruksana Osman is the Head of the Wits School of Education. She has worked in teacher education and as a teacher educator for the last 23 years. She has been the recipient of grants from the Spencer and the Carnegie Foundations and the National Research Foundation. She has also been the recipient of the JUTA academic prize for the best scholarly article in the category “perspectives in higher education”

In the last few months the media has focused sharply on failing learners, dysfunctional schools and the downfall of Outcomes Based Education. Implicitly the focus has also been on ineffective teacher preparation, raising questions about quality teacher training, the most efficient pathway for teacher preparation and the ideal location for teacher preparation programmes. This scrutiny is not going to go away – if anything it will become sharper and harsher in the next few years as market driven demands for accountability and efficiencies in teacher education become the order of the day and where quality means compliance and value for money.

In South Africa, University based teacher educators do not as yet carry the blame for poor quality schooling. It is a matter of time before we will be criticised for being irrelevant to the needs on the ground; or too time consuming in our programmes; or too expensive in training teachers – which some believe could be done faster and cheaper by reopening the colleges of education. This latter issue is a debate that must be had – but at another time and in another place. The important issue to remember is that it is not the location of teacher preparation programmes that matter but what is in the teacher preparation programme and how it prepares teachers to teach the nation’s children.

Preparing teachers for the classroom

The focus of this paper is to consider the professional preparation and education of primary school teachers. I want to argue that such preparation is our ‘professional jurisdiction’¹ as university based teacher educators and that we must take responsibility for producing academic knowledge that supports professional practice and for preparing future professionals for public schools. This twin prong mandate is ours. In addition, it is our responsibility to ensure that such preparation resonates with the problematic of the practitioner and that it produces teachers who can teach in all schools in our country. In practice this means that our preparation of primary school teachers must make a difference to student learning in high need schools, that our research must improve in quality and it must inform professional practice and educational policy. A tall order indeed, and as Zeichner² points out, if we are not prepared to take this responsibility more seriously and do all that we can to have the best possible teacher education programmes, then we should let someone else do the job. From this perspective, the stakes are high for universities and university based teacher education.

In view of the responsibility we carry as university based teacher educators, we need to take a long term view about teacher education and development, a view separated out from the immediate pressure to respond to teacher shortages by opening up colleges of education. Let's recognise that a fully fledged quality system of providing for the educational needs of our country will take time to develop, and that classroom teaching expertise is complex and cannot be attained quickly. In the short term, let's be careful not to let the immediate needs and pressures overwhelm the long term trajectory of research-led quality teacher education and development in South Africa.

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Research-led & Research-based approach

This paper is intended as a contribution to renewing meaningful conversations about teacher preparation – it is thus a contribution to debate, not its conclusion. I would like to explore a research-led and research-based approach to teacher education for primary school teachers, rather than fixating on pathways into teaching or on the location of teacher education. It would be megalomaniacal to attempt to prescribe a formula for all forms of teacher education or teacher education and training. Rather, I offer a perspective from which it is possible, in principle, to appraise any form of teacher education – although for purposes of coherence and integrity I write only of what I know and have experienced as a teacher-educator in the last 23 years.

In a country where multiple social inequalities are prevalent, quality education and quality teacher education are the challenges we face and must respond to appropriately. I take the view that systematic research, grounded in the concerns and problems of educational practice, makes the difference in quality teacher education and it is this issue that I take up in this paper.

Despite the many challenges in research-led and research based teacher education such an approach remains a viable and useful way of approaching the teaching and training of primary school teachers, especially in societies where social and economic inequalities loom large and where the institutionalisation of quality teaching and learning is still a challenging task for policy planning and implementation. The emphasis on quick skills teacher training and the dominance of teacher shortage talk has overshadowed attention to deep knowledge, skills and dispositions which underpin research-led university based teacher education. While the pervasive demands of the market must be recognised, the pressure for quality teacher education in a developmental state must be ongoing and applied from different sectors – universities, the state and civil society.

I begin with the theory/practice dichotomy which has been at the basis of most conversations about what goes into a teacher education program. This is also the central feature of all professional education – be it teaching doctors, lawyers or teachers. So we are not in this alone. For those of us who have been in teacher education know that theory without practice is dangerous, and theory *sans* opportunities for 'try outs' in contexts of practice is unthinkable. Similarly, practice without theoretical underpinning is a dangerously conservative force in education and can be a barrier to educational reform. Rather than getting stuck in this dichotomy, it makes sense to explore other ways of teacher learning – teacher education and training that encourages, combines and finds creative ways to connect theory and practice, and teacher preparation that locates theory in the context of the practice.

Centrality of Training

Recent developments in teacher education worldwide recognise that learning to teach is a process of lifelong learning, and inquiry is a vital part of teachers' work³. Further, there is greater recognition of teachers as researchers and of the transformative potential of research for their practice and development⁴. In the same vein, Grumet⁵ asserts that teaching, by its very nature, is congruent with reflection and research. These assertions contrast sharply with more instrumentalist views of teacher education as training, which consist of transmitting a 'bag of tricks' or tips about what works in the classroom or, worse, a large set of untheorised and bureaucratically driven competences. Training is vital, as it is in medical training and social work training and it goes beyond tips for teaching.

Research-based teacher education is also important in light of trends in schools in many countries to reduce teacher autonomy and to de-professionalise teaching. Developing primary school teachers as scholars and researchers nurtures in them an opportunity to grapple with questions of teaching and learning in such complex social environments as schools. It allows South African teachers to imagine a progressive social vision which could deepen their understanding of teaching in complex environments characterised by inequities, and which are distinct and distant from the university class. More importantly, this orientation to their education and training could bring teachers closer to research, rather than isolating them from it, as is the case traditionally, and it could shift the emphasis away from "the hegemony of an exclusively university-generated knowledge base for teaching"⁶. More recently, Darling-Hammond⁷ has argued that if student teachers are to succeed in teaching in complex environments, then "the enterprise of teacher education must ... engage ever more closely with school". In South Africa, where education and teacher education were tools for domination, discrimination and exclusion, whole school discourse and the development of future teachers as researchers and lifelong learners sets up expectations of teachers different from those held under apartheid. According to Sayed⁸, this alteration to the curriculum could be a welcome shift from apartheid teacher training, characterised as it was by different programmes for different racial groups and programmes for blacks underpinned by compliance, rote, and transmission-orientated practices.

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Shifting Roles of Teachers

Teacher education reform in South Africa has created a shift in thinking about the role of teachers and the school in national development. Through legislative changes, teacher education has changed from a provincial responsibility to a national responsibility⁹. This has resulted in teacher colleges being merged or incorporated into universities and, subsequently, teacher education becoming university-based. Similar reforms are occurring in the United States¹⁰, as well as Namibia, especially in the context of the latter country's Basic Education Teacher Diploma, and through efforts to promote critical practitioner inquiry (CPI) in teacher education programmes¹¹. In other countries as well, the new discourse in teacher education is about 'whole school development', linked to wider social development, which emphasises the importance of learning communities in schools and classrooms. Such shifts in teacher preparation call into question dichotomies between theoretical and practical, academic and experiential, and teaching and researching, and point to programmes that focus on reflective practice or practitioner inquiry.

Developing the reflective primary school teacher or, as I prefer to see it, the inquiring teacher, who is actively engaged in studying her practices as a teacher through the eyes and the learning practices of her learners, is something all of us committed to quality education and teacher education must strive towards. This, ultimately, is a vision of a primary school teacher who is prepared to pursue issues that arise in classroom practice, through recourse to fieldwork, literature, and colleagues.

Classroom research is an important and growing aspect of developing education, through the work of inquiring teachers, often in an action research spiral of investigation, growing understanding and implementation for change. Of particular interest in this approach to teacher education will be inquiry into disciplinary knowledge and the acquisition of disciplinary capabilities, or transforming disciplinary knowledge into pedagogical knowledge, sometimes referred to as pedagogical content knowledge. Educating primary school teachers along these lines offers them narratives which broadens their outlooks and their orientation to their practice in the classroom.

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Sketching the background that led to the “teacher research” movement, Richardson¹² noted that the kind of teacher identity being sought is that of “teacher as inquirer” — “a teacher who questions his or her assumptions and is consciously thoughtful about goals, practices, students, and contexts”. Within this conception, inquiry is viewed as a powerful tool for informing the thoughtful development of pedagogic practice, with close associations to Schön’s¹³ notion of the reflective practitioner. Drawing on Richardson’s work, Venkat et al¹⁴ posit that, central to the argument for incorporating research activity as either a guiding frame for teacher learning, or as a specific component in teacher preparation, is the notion that “practical inquiry” is at the heart of thoughtful pedagogic practice, teacher development and improvements in teaching and schooling.

However, there are different conceptions of ‘inquiry’ and research activity within teacher education, with differing associated goals and mediating activities. Richardson distinguishes between research as ‘practical inquiry’ and research as ‘formal research’, with the two orientations differentiated in relation to their products and goals, the nature and conventions of activity, and the communities engaging in activities.

Practical inquiry is that “conducted by practitioners to help them understand their contexts, practices, and, in the case of teachers, their students. The outcome of the inquiry may be a change in practice or it may be enhanced understanding”, while formal research is “research designed to contribute to a general knowledge about and understandings of educational processes, players, outcomes, and contexts, and the relationship between or among them”¹⁵. Explicit methodological approaches and theoretical frames are important within the latter approach, but are less in focus in the former. Localised change and development – of understandings and practices – are foregrounded in the first, whereas addition to a generalised knowledge base is foregrounded in the second. Both approaches can involve reading and using the products of ‘formal research’, but as already noted, the driving purpose for engaging in these activities is likely to differ between them. Within the teacher research literature some writing is aligned more strongly with the practical action and improvement orientation of ‘practical inquiry’¹⁶, while other writing has made a case for activity to span across both

Zeichner²¹ reminds us: “If we are to take seriously our obligation to prepare teachers to successfully teach all students, then we need ... to situate more of teacher preparation outside of the ... university campus in schools and communities, but we need to do much more than just send them out there to pick up what they need to learn by a process of osmosis”. We need to guide these partnerships and underpin them with what we do well and best – research led teacher education.

The time is now right to treat teacher education as a discipline which must have research and scholarship which is grounded in local realities. We need to get beyond territorial debates about where primary school teachers should be prepared and how long they need to study before going out to teach. Let's

focus instead on what should and could underpin such preparation and let's expect for our children the best prepared teachers.

Fiscal realities may demand that we get the teacher education of primary school teachers right the first time – but it does not make sense merely to offer a quick fix form of training so that we can get teachers out into the system. Inevitably this will require engaging in expensive teacher upgrading at a later stage, and thus would be false economy, or saving now to spend later. I take the view that investment in good quality research-based and research-led teacher education for primary school teachers is more economical in the long run, and is one of the dimensions which contributes to quality learning for pupils in the school.

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- Hussein, J. (2006). *Experience-based reflections on the potential for critical practitioner inquiry to transform teacher education in Africa*. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 4, 362–384. Recently her gaze is shifting from the macro issues of access and equity within higher education to the micro issues of teacher education pedagogy and teaching and learning in higher education. In particular she is interested in the question of how learning and teaching can be brought about in more powerful ways so that we move beyond questions of access to questions about success in higher education. This research work is part of a multi year research and development project and is in collaboration with colleagues from the University of the Witwatersrand and Gothenburg

University in Sweden.

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NOTES

- ¹ Abbott, 1988
- ² Zeichner (1999:13)
- ³ Cockran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Leite, 2006
- ⁴ Claninidin et al, 1993
- ⁵ Grumet (1990)
- ⁶ Cockran-Smith & Lytle, 1999:16
- ⁷ Darling-Hammond (2006:302)
- ⁸ Sayed (2004:258)
- ⁹ Jansen, 2004
- ¹⁰ Darling-Hammond, 2006
- ¹¹ Zeichner & Dahlström, 1999
- ¹² Richardson (1994:6)
- ¹³ Schön (1983)
- ¹⁴ Venkat et al (2009)
- ¹⁵ Richardson 1994:7
- ¹⁶ Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Hussein, 2006; Schon, 1983
- ¹⁷ Cochran Smith & Lytle, 1993
- ¹⁸ Diezmann (2005: 183)
- ¹⁹ Richardson 1994:8
- ²⁰ Darling-Hammond (2006)
- ²¹ Zeichner (2006:334)