



Editorial: What Price the Knowledge Base for Teaching?

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The current National coalition government has made it clear that tertiary education funding is to be capped for the foreseeable future. Or as it was rather more positively 'spun' by the Minister of Tertiary Education: 'Spending on tertiary education is being maintained at current baseline levels' (NZ Parliament, 2010, p. 14124). At the time of writing, the standard domestic inflation measure, the consumer price index (CPI), is running at 5.3 percent annually. The public tertiary education sector is therefore going rapidly backwards if spending is only 'maintained at current baseline levels'. But in reality the funding situation is even worse, because CPI does not take into account actual tertiary education sector costs. In its briefing to the incoming government in 2008, the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors Committee (NZVCC) made some blunt observations about the chronic underfunding of tertiary education. Across the university sector, tuition revenue from equivalent full time student (EFTs) funding by government and from student fees fell 18 percent in the 1990s and a further two percent between 2000 and 2008 (during which time student fee increases were capped by government). Between 1990 and 2005, salary costs increased at 1.96 times the rate of increase in the CPI. On an annual basis, non-salary costs were estimated to increase at an average rate of 1.6 times the rate of inflation (NZVCC, 2008).

In 1993, the year in which student fees were first deregulated and set by institutions, Palmerston North College of Education received \$10308 per EFT (\$9603 government subsidy, and a student fee of \$705) for study-right students enrolled in the internal primary school undergraduate pre-service programme. The College merged with Massey University in 1996. In 2010, Massey University received \$12686 per EFT (\$8451 government subsidy, \$4235 student fee) for the equivalent programme. Adjusted for CPI, the 2010 figure would have been \$15105 per EFT, or approximately 20 percent higher. Although part of the shortfall in 2010 is directly attributable to the unbundling of the automatic 'research top up' component of the EFTs funding, and its replacement with the contestable performance-based research fund (PBRF) allocations, fully implemented from 2008, nevertheless it seems reasonable to conclude that the funding base for teacher education has been substantially eroded by successive governments over the last twenty years (with the prospect of further conditionality of a component of the tuition subsidy based on successful student completions from 2012. The figures also take no account of burgeoning compliance costs on tertiary education providers since 1989).

Ironically, as many professional preparation tertiary education programmes in all disciplines have found, at the same time that programme funding from government is diminishing, the professional knowledge base of the discipline and associated profession is rapidly increasing. In teaching, we know a lot more these days about how children learn, and why they do not, about the

effects of family resources, culture and context on children's learning, on the iterative relationships between teaching and learning, and those between cognition, self-efficacy and the peer influences on learning. The pedagogical repertoire continues to expand in order to differentiate teaching to meet the needs of individual children, while the assessment repertoire grows in response both to the imperative to plan each child's next miniscule learning goals and the insatiable appetite of politicians and officials to measure, in ever finer-grained detail, the 'value-added' component of the classroom experience.

On the one hand, we should rightly celebrate the growing recognition, and the accompanying evidence base, that teaching is a very complex endeavour that requires highly specialised knowledge, skills and dispositions. Given such complexity, we need to accept that there are consequent implications for how teacher education must be organised, funded and delivered if beginning teachers are to successfully acquire enough of that knowledge base (abstract knowledge, practical skills and moral dispositions) to be able to function as informed professionals in ever more challenging and demanding classroom circumstances.

In our view, there ought to be a moral 'bottom-line' for teacher educators. That bottom line is ensuring that pre-service students have the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions to meaningfully support children and young people's learning. This means lobbying for more funding and refusing to dilute further our unique knowledge base.

It is particularly concerning, therefore, to see some education professionals in Aotearoa New Zealand apparently working to undermine the basic principle that a profession is only a profession when it can demonstrate the uniqueness of its specialised knowledge base, and requires all those who wish to practise in that professional field to acquire the necessary knowledge prior to being granted a licence to practice.

In this regard, both the craft apprenticeship model in the proposed Teach First New Zealand scheme (www.teachfirstnz.org) and the Education Workforce Advisory Group's (EWAG) recommendation that undergraduate teacher education should be abolished to improve professional entry standards, are particularly worrying. In the former, pre-service students will receive an attenuated introduction to the knowledge-base of teaching before taking sole-charge of a class of students in particularly socio-economically disadvantaged, hard to staff secondary schools. In the latter, the justification given for moving to a graduate entry route is the erroneous claim that 'the undergraduate degree provides the generic academic skills and subject specific knowledge which allows for a greater focus in the postgraduate qualification on the skills necessary to be an effective teacher' (EWAG, 2010, p. 6). Both initiatives exacerbate an already false and unhelpful distinction between the abstract knowledge (episteme) and skills (techne) that are needed to become a wise teacher capable of exercising thoughtful professional judgment (phronesis). Just as seriously, they fail to recognise the uniqueness of the knowledge base of teaching while, at the same time, representing teaching skills as behaviour management nostrums rather than the skilled arts and crafts of engaging young people in productive learning activities that build their identities as self-confident learners and social agents. Learners' needs do not lie at the heart of these proposals.

These two initiatives, and the arguments that underpin them, are in one sense, perhaps, an understandably pragmatic response to the institutional constraints imposed by continually eroding government funding levels for public sector teacher education over many years. In another sense, those who advocate them are deluded in suggesting that it is possible to advocate the cause of teacher professionalism while at the same time sapping its knowledge base from within. The only way to educate candidates adequately for the many challenges of contemporary classroom life in public schools is through a comprehensive professional preparation programme. Given the ever expanding nature of our knowledge of learning and teaching, we should, in our view, be talking about lengthening teacher education programmes, not further shortening them. Both initiatives would serve to reduce the cost of teacher education to government (one indirectly through philanthropy, the other more directly by saving two to three years of higher cost category EFTS tuition subsidy), but at what price for teaching and its knowledge base?

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