



## **Signing Off the Standards, Making the Disciplines Mandatory**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The place of the foundational disciplines in teacher education has long been an issue of on-going debate amongst programme developers, teacher educators and students. In 1951 a departmental report on the recruitment, education and training of teachers acknowledged that the work of practising teachers, academics and research students in a number of disciplinary areas had resulted in 'an immense growth of knowledge relevant to the business of education' (Campbell, 1951, p.2). Concerned educators, who have been aware of the limitations of our educational system in providing equitable outcomes for all students, have seized the opportunities such knowledges have provided to inform their practice. Others have remained sceptical and chosen to ignore the possibilities that attention to such insights may offer. However, with the introduction of the *Graduating Teacher Standards* (New Zealand Teachers Council [NZTC], 2008) and the imperative for students to demonstrate critical engagement with contextual factors, courses drawing on disciplinary perspectives have become mandatory. It is no longer possible for graduating teachers to accept the advice of less critical and more sceptical colleagues to forget the theory of education since they are about to go into the real world.

As teacher educators who also work on liberal arts education programmes, we teach courses in history of education, social theory and critical policy analysis. By exploring the social nature of education policy and practice with the students, and its implications over time, we hope to encourage and support their growth as critical educators. History and sociology are the two key disciplinary areas that inform our practice. Over the past five years, however, we have experienced changes in our teacher education programmes which have progressively reduced student access to these (and other) foundational knowledge. In this article we consider the place of these particular disciplinary areas in teacher education now that there are prescribed *Graduating Teacher Standards* that all students must meet. Because we believe that today's standards are a 21<sup>st</sup> century rendition of an old refrain, we begin by providing an historical overview of the ways in which the notion of 'standards' has permeated teacher education discourses. Our comments relate primarily to sociology, not only because this has become the main area of

contention, but because in order to satisfy the *Graduating Teacher Standards* students are now required to demonstrate an ability to relate sociological theory and research to their understandings and experiences of policy, schools, classrooms and students. We therefore consider the contested nature of the role of sociology in teacher education programmes over time, and its relationship to the shifting mandate for education.

Our experience is that many teacher education students are resistant to this aspect of their work, seeing it as irrelevant and complex. We are concerned about the professional implications for those who reject the insights that such knowledge may contribute to their successful demonstration of having met those standards. To demonstrate this tension, we present an analysis of student responses to compulsory courses with a sociological base in one institution. We suggest that the way professional requirements and student expectations come together in 2009 has significant implications for both students and teacher education programmes.

## ESTABLISHING THE FOUNDATIONS

In 1956, Lawrence Cremin was commenting on the amount of interest being generated about schooling in America at that time, and was concerned that attempts to address educational issues could only begin to be addressed if some fundamental questions were first posed. ‘What good is a concern with obtaining and retaining good teachers’, he asked, ‘if we are not entirely sure what a good teacher is or does?’ (Cremin, 1956, p.354). This is a perennial question, it would appear, one which has preoccupied policy makers, practitioners and receivers of education across time. Not surprisingly, with the development of education systems, it has increasingly become a question for teacher education programmes.

As far back as 1871, when attempts were being made to draw disparate provincial offerings into a national education system in New Zealand, notions of ‘the qualified teacher’ were being articulated as key to a successful system. In introducing the 1871 Education Bill to parliament, Premier William Fox stated from an educationally impoverished Wellington:

I believe in no single Province in New Zealand ... has there been proper inspection or a proper precaution in order to secure that the teachers shall possess the requisite qualifications; and without those the whole system becomes, to a great extent, a delusion.

New Zealand Parliamentary Debates [NZPD] (1871, p.200)

Indeed, the lack of any nation-wide system of training teachers for schools in the early colonial years was identified during the debates around the Education Bill of 1871 as ‘one of the greatest difficulties the Colony labour[ed] under’ (NZPD, 1871, p.238). With centralization of political and educational administration in the later 1870s, general regulations for the training and certification of teachers were framed. These were guiding principles on which individual district education boards could formulate, and submit for government approval, a set of organizational and conduct standards for institutions established in their own

area (*New Zealand Gazette [NZG]*, 1878). Together with the teaching standards that were institutionalised at the same time, the first national mechanisms were created through which teachers and children alike could be moulded through standardised practices to perform at a standardised curriculum according to standardised expectations.

In their training, teachers were prepared to supervise childhood and to regulate the socialisation of children as useful, contributing and moral citizens of the nation. This was expressed in early classificatory criteria and procedures. Teachers were graded for their ability to impart both knowledge and moral values. Attaining a teaching certificate was determined by age, examination success, completion of two years of work experience and the personal recommendation by an inspector or a training school principal. In fulfilling this final requirement the meticulous records which were kept of trainees were drawn on to demonstrate the student's 'fitness to teach and to exercise control' (*NZG*, 1878, p.1308). This evaluated what the teacher *was* as well as what the teacher *could do*. A successful teacher was to 'preserve order in their schools, and teach the prescribed subjects well [and to do] what in them lies to form the characters of their pupils' (*Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*, 1880, E-1, p.4). Over time, such attitudes and expectations have taken various forms and emphases. This has reflected dominant views of 'the qualified teacher' at specific points in time and the social, political and economic contexts within which they were expressed.

Whilst the formalisation of a national system of training colleges in 1905 supported a practice that had been initiated in some areas in the early years, that students could undertake concurrent university study, this did not necessarily translate to practice. A tension between theory and practice remained unresolved (Openshaw & Ball, 2005). Nonetheless, change in the academic context in which teacher education was located did occur throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not the least of which was the continuing development in social knowledges that the Campbell Report of 1951, mentioned in the introduction to this paper, had noted. This heralded one of the more visible periods for sociology in its mixed fortunes in teacher education programmes. Focus on the concept of the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959) and the usefulness of the social sciences in asking critical questions of the world of practitioners and policy makers was initially well received. Sociologists could, through their research and theoretical insights, investigate the structures and attempt to explain the processes involved in education, with a view to establishing a basis for social reform. As Dale argued, despite their critical stance, sociologists were committed to the project of social redemption through universal provision, and pursued objectives not dissimilar to the expressed goals of policy makers during the period of Keynesian welfarism (Dale, 1992).

As notions about the nature of teacher training became increasingly embedded in efforts by and on behalf of practitioners to have their professional status recognised and valued (Snook, 2000), a struggle to define what that may mean in terms of the nature of their study ensued. At the same time, as Noeline Alcorn argued, 'continuing dominance of dedicated teacher education institutions with close links to schools and to central government education agencies resulted in a reasonably homogenous curriculum and espoused values, but little real experimentation or autonomy' (Alcorn, 1999, p.63). However, from the 1990s, within a neoliberal agenda that separated policy from operations, the

voice of the professionals lost its authority. The policy environment is one in which consumer choice and provider accountability dominates, and where the dominant mandate for education has been to ensure New Zealand's competitiveness in the global knowledge economy (Dale, 2008).

Part of that mandate has been to address the 'wastage of national resource' identified in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's [OECD] Programme of International Student Assessment [PISA] (OECD, 2001). Because of the demographics of the group represented in the underachievement statistics in that testing programme, PISA results have initiated national attempts to identify 'best practices' – or what we prefer to call *promising practices* (Parker, 2007) – for groups marginalised by schooling processes (Alton-Lee, 2003). In such a policy environment, and given the fact that early neoliberal policies encouraged a proliferation of providers and competition, it has become necessary for the teaching profession itself to have 'more certainty in the quality of all graduates from all teacher education programmes' (NZTC, 2008). This imperative for teacher educators and teachers alike has been addressed by the NZTC which has made some definitive decision about what a good teacher in 2009 is and does. This has been explicitly stated in the *Graduating Teacher Standards*.

## TODAY'S STANDARDS

The standards cover three broad areas of professional knowledge, professional practice and professional values and relationships. Teachers are required to reach a level of consistent quality within these three areas. As Alton-Lee (2003, p.9) noted, recent syntheses of research on effective teaching highlighted an 'increased understanding that context is important'. Teachers are therefore expected to have an awareness of the historical, political, social and economic contexts in which teaching and learning takes place and in which the education system is situated. In particular, they are to demonstrate their understanding of the significance of the bicultural and multicultural nature of Aotearoa New Zealand society, and an ability to establish and promote safe learning environments for students. The standards outline professional values and relationships, and teachers are required to demonstrate an understanding of what this means for them as teachers, in building relationships with students, parents, colleagues, and the community. The *Graduating Teacher Standards* therefore outline the dispositions a teacher will have to be an effective teacher, and what he/she will know, understand and be able to do (NZTC, 2008).

Teachers today are required to complete their degree, meet the requirements of the *Graduating Teacher Standards*, and then serve two years as a beginning teacher. Echoing the 1878 national regulations for teachers, for an applicant to be registered, the NZTC must be satisfied that the person is of good character and fit to be a teacher. Fitness to teach takes into account that the candidate 'displays respect for persons, for cultural and social values of Aotearoa New Zealand, for the law and for the views of others' (NZTC, 2008). The anticipation is, then, that registration will endorse the qualities beginning teachers demonstrate on graduation from their teacher education programmes. Beginning teachers will enter schools understanding the impact of contextual factors on teaching and learning, being able to create safe and supportive learning

environments, and having the knowledge and disposition to work alongside community groups to enhance the educational experience for diverse learners. This reinforces our view that having a knowledge of, and ability to apply, sociological understandings to make sense of policy, practice and the processes of schooling has become mandatory in teacher education programmes. And yet, such studies have increasingly become a bone of contention as the challenges that sociologists lay before educators persistently highlight the stark, uncomfortable realities of social and institutional inequalities (Henry, Knight, Lingard & Taylor, 1988).

Attempts to dispel sociology from teacher education programmes were noted from the late 1970s (Arnot & Barton, 1992; Openshaw & Ball, 2005). This became more aggressive with the introduction of the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s (Whitty, 1994; Snook, 1998; Dixon, Williams & Snook, 2001), and courses were progressively squeezed out in the associated restructuring of teacher education programmes. The fact that current demands to meet *Graduating Teacher Standards* makes foundational disciplines mandatory in teacher education programmes seems to be conveniently overlooked. Often reduced from a suite of supportive theoretical papers, and further reduced in a semesterised 12-week bite, lean offerings engender confusion and much resistance, even antagonism from students who are often indisposed to clutter an already crammed day with material that does not allow them to simply get on with what they see as the 'real business of teaching'. Despite an espoused focus on reflective practice, a major concern must be the lack of opportunity for student engagement in critical inquiry, or more specifically, to inform reflection and practice through the application of historical and sociological perspectives.

## **HOW THE STUDENTS SEE IT**

Moves to marginalise the disciplines have not been uncontested. Studies from concerned educationalists have argued for the need to resist such a direction in teacher education programmes (Ball, 1996; Diem & Helfenbein, 2008; Snook, 1998). Other studies focus on strategies that seek to engender interest and engagement from the students (Hammerness, 2006). This can be difficult because what teacher educators want for their students does not necessarily coincide with what the students themselves want, or see as optimal, from their teacher preparation. They often seek the stability of the familiar, and anticipate that structures from their own classroom experiences will be replicated in their new institutions. New approaches are often rejected; attempts to question attitudes and acknowledge a variety of perspectives looked on with suspicion.

Teacher education students consistently express mixed responses to courses in social theory. Often up to 30 percent indicate resistance, sometimes even hostility, to course content that they see as irrelevant to their teaching practice. Regular formal university course and teacher evaluations, administered by staff not involved with the teaching of the course, or more recently through an on-line option, provide opportunity for open anonymous comment from students. These are analysed at a university central agency after which they are forwarded to relevant staff to inform on-going course and personal professional development. In addition, some students prefer to communicate their evaluation of course content more directly with staff, either by email, through organised

meetings or even within class discussions. We welcome all these opportunities to hear student comments, especially for what we may learn about our own pedagogy in mediating their concerns and encouraging closer engagement with the ideas. The stakes are high – in meeting professional requirements on paper and in practice.

In this final part of the paper we look at some of the forms that student resistance may take and how it may be understood. We suggest that there are many challenges in attempting to make sense of the ways the students respond to being confronted with social theory in their education programmes. But there are many possibilities also. We read comments that students have made about the courses and ask questions about what such responses might mean in terms of their understanding of the impact of contextual factors on teaching and learning. Our intention is to point to some of the barriers that may work against their readiness to engage with the ideas being presented in the courses.

The standards require students to be reflexive practitioners who are able to engage with critical questions relating to social justice and power. For many students this will be one of the greatest challenges they have to meet on their journey to becoming transformative practitioners. It demands skills in developing argument and thinking critically. However, there is an explicit tension between thinking critically and the technocratic expectations of responding to prescribed assessment criteria. As Alcorn forewarned ten years ago, ‘while the ongoing debate around professional standards has been healthy, there is a continuing danger that official prescriptions may stifle creativity and questioning’ (Alcorn, 1999, p.75). One of the greatest constraints we are finding is the overall thrust of standards-based educational experiences when this becomes the basis for assessment on courses that ask students to demonstrate their understanding of the way contextual factors influence teaching and learning.

Our attempts to encourage students to engage actively with the ideas we are exploring as an integral part of the assessment process is often strongly resisted. A major source of resistance is their obsession with getting the ‘right answers’ and being able to reproduce those in their written work. For many, accessing the grades through rigidly defined criteria is of far greater concern than is critical engagement with ideas. Some of the tensions at play are elucidated in the work of Kathy Hytten (2008) in the account of her efforts to encourage students to think critically about social justice. After exposure to some acknowledged readings on the topic, she was somewhat alarmed at the responses she received to the question, ‘What does social justice mean?’:

While none of these readings had explicitly defined social justice, it is an explicit and overriding theme throughout them. Yet, the responses I got from my students, at least the few that did not give me blank stares, were vague and tentative. They suggested justice as the same as fairness, but then struggled to go much further in unpacking fairness and describing what it might look like in the social realm. While I was asking them to think deeply and critically, to make sense of broader theory, an all too familiar pattern emerged: they seemed to want me to tell them what to think and, more urgently, what to say on the upcoming paper on the topic. They were frustrated with ambiguity, impatient with the difficult work of uncovering assumptions and

fundamental beliefs, and habituated to expect me to tell them what they need to say and do, ultimately in order to get a good grade. In short, while they may have been well 'schooled', they were hardly well educated. (p.186)

As Diem points out, being expected to understand *why* they think what they think and being expected to articulate their views in a rigorous way that can 'withstand scrutiny and critique' is difficult for students who have gone through a schooling system which is obsessed with meeting assessment criteria that tells them what they have to think (Diem, 2008, p.125). This is an issue we confront as we wrestle with the need to meet institutional compliance mechanisms (identifying assessment criteria linked to learning outcomes and now *Graduating Teacher Standards*) and students' concern to access high grades through what they have come to understand as the optimal means of doing so. As Hytten notes, encouraging change in students is difficult when they have been accustomed to being rewarded for 'right answers', not the 'persuasive possibilities' that she encourages (Hytten, 2008, p.194).

Students have a variety of personal responses to exposure to social theory, but they often simply find it difficult to engage in theoretical conversations. This relates not only to the complexities of the ideas but also to the likelihood that these may 'unsettle' their worlds as they have always believed them to be (Diem & Helfenbein, 2008). Learning new ways of understanding what has previously been familiar does not come easily. The discomfort such experiences cause may manifest in forms of defensive posture that enables them to avoid implicating themselves within the unfamiliar world that is emerging. Attempts to disrupt the myths of gender neutrality, classlessness and racial harmony in New Zealand, for example, elicit some strong responses:

I'm sick of this white male middle class bashing. Why can't we realize we are all New Zealanders here.

There was a bit too much about what should've happened in education. And how poorly we have treated certain people rather than what can be done and the positive aspects of education. It was a bit depressing ...and racist.

I felt that the course presumed we would know very little about Maori culture and the influences shaping education in New Zealand. It ostracized Pakeha/New Zealanders (even those of us who are open, tolerant and proactive/protective of Maori culture!!). At times I noted racist comments.

Some students personalize explanations of domination – whether as blame, guilt, anger, frustration, oppression, and victimizing. In such cases, denial of relevance or critique of the content may be an attempt to allow some sort of comfort equilibrium:

This paper is very inappropriate for our teaching course. It doesn't make sense at all to our future. Bring some interesting lectures and take Maori themes out of it.

Too much time was spent on this subject over curriculum subjects that are needed to be a successful teacher.

The course was very autocratic, rigid and extremely complex as it's very political. Too much politics thus hard to comprehend for the group below 30. Needs to have limited amount of readings so that it's realistic and possible to follow.

One of the difficulties students experience in coming to terms with complex theoretical concepts relates to the need to engage with a wide variety of academic reading. This is often resisted not only because of its perceived irrelevance to their teaching practice but also because of the mental effort required to actually do reading which they see as completely disproportionate to any academic or professional gain they may experience.

There were far too many readings and some were difficult to read ...  
I think this course had too too too many readings. Just OVERLOAD, so I just gave up. There is a term 'QUALITY not QUANTITY'. We had practicum and just stuffed up the whole semester!! Pleased this will be over soon!

This does not mean they are not prepared to make the effort. Anver Segall identifies two related ways of understanding the students' responses when confronted with such tasks. Firstly, he suggests they may not recognize their own implication in the processes and practices they are reading about, so that, whilst they may consciously attend to assigned reading, they quite unproblematically externalize the ideas as being applicable to 'other places, other teachers, other contexts' (Segall, 2008, p.17). Thus we hear such comments as:

How does this relate to the classroom. I don't see anything like this in my classroom ...

'Other contexts' may be seen in historical terms. The invitation to identify improvements the students would like to see in the course often suggests the irrelevance of the past:

More info on society and schooling today instead of the history of Maori in NZ. Points made on the typical white male got too much and overused (too much focus on racial inequalities).

Segall suggests that taking this position enables students to mentally 'disengage from a text even as they purportedly engage in it' (Segall, 2008, p.17). We see evidence of disengaged reading in our students' proud display of their highlighted texts at the beginning of the tutorial sessions. What we sometimes struggle to find is evidence of un-highlighted text – a clear indication of mental separation from the task, albeit the intention is equally clear. What we may also struggle to find is evidence of an unsettling or re-examination of beliefs in the classroom discussions of the readings or their application to practice.



## CONCLUDING COMMENT

Within the field of education, courses in history, sociology and policy studies continue to struggle for justification in a market environment in which higher education has become a form of private investment and return. A vocational and pre-career emphasis, whilst emerging originally in response to a period of economic decline, remains a key motivation in the contemporary context. The demand for pre-service and career up-grade qualifications, combined with a minimal teacher preparation period, has meant that some disciplinary-based courses have been significantly impacted. What remains uncertain, however, is what this will mean for students who do not have the opportunity to consolidate their understandings of the political nature of education.

Major questions therefore emerge from our inquiry. What do we do, as teacher educators, when we are confronted by blatant racism, classism, sexism, ableism, religious bigotry and homophobia from our students in the various forms of feedback we receive from disciplinary-based courses, or in student actions and interactions? Worse still, what can we do about such responses when the opportunity to support student learning in these areas has been eroded in an otherwise crowded curriculum? Will the students hoping to graduate from teacher education programmes be able to demonstrate successful attainment of all of the standards? We feel that these are important questions for programme developers to keep in mind as they work through ways in which students may present their evidence that they have met the *Graduating Teacher Standards*.

Our hope is to support pre-service teachers to become the reflective, critically and socially knowledgeable teachers that the *Graduating Teacher Standards* expect them to be, but this is becoming increasingly difficult. Our classrooms need teachers who, like the young woman who wrote the comment below, have been open to the challenge of becoming unsettled as part of their preparation as transformative practitioners:

This course has really stimulated my thinking, influences of Maori and other cultures and what it is to live and be a New Zealander. The assignments caused me to reflect on and sometimes find opinions that I did not know I have. This in turn stimulated conversations with people I know and I could gauge their opinions and get them to reflect. So far I've talked about Maori immersion schools, the near disappearance of the Maori culture and I think my next topic will be what it is to be a NZ'er. I've talked with both Maori and Pakeha and elicited their opinions. This has been a fascinating journey so thank you very much.

Within the *Graduating Teacher Standards* are possibilities for critical engagement with critical social problems. However, these possibilities are compromised within teacher education programmes in which social and policy theory is marginalized almost to extinction. They are compromised also within the current political, economic and educational context which demands compliance to a narrowly-defined notion of what counts as education in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2009.

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