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This is the author version of an article published as:

McMaugh, M., and Saltmarsh, D., (2008) "Understanding teachers of the future", in Aspland, Tania. *Teacher educators at work : what works and where is the evidence? : proceedings of the 2008 Australian Teacher Education Association National Conference*, Australian Teacher Education Association, (2008)

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Understanding teachers of the future

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Understanding teachers of the future

Background

As we progress through the first decade of the new century, teachers, teaching and teacher education continue to feature prominently in public debates and media reports. In 2000, Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2000) heralded an emerging phenomenon of criticism and “even bashing”(p.13) of teacher education within the political and historical contexts of the last decade. As Cochran-Smith noted, such criticism of teacher education was not new in United States history, but was now dominated by the standards movement, accreditation concerns, and wider debates about the purpose of public schooling.

In Australia, the political and historical discourses surrounding teaching and teacher education appear to parallel those outlined by Cochran-Smith (2000). Increased public scrutiny of education has seen the emergence in NSW of a standards based teacher accreditation system, matched with an accreditation system for teacher education programmes. Indeed, developments in our systems of schooling and debate over the purpose of schooling, also parallel those later outlined by Cochran-Smith. This is apparent in the increasing privatisation of schooling options, and increased debate about the rights of public versus private schools to equitable shares of public funding monies. This recent public debate has contributed to a range of inquiries, reports and political investigations of teaching and teacher education. The NSW Teachers Federation and the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations contributed to the debate with the *Inquiry into Public Education* (Vinson, Esson, & Johnston, 2002), and various State and Federal reports have examined the costs of qualifying teachers; recruitment of teachers; shortages of teachers in specific subject areas; content of teacher education programs and the attrition of teachers from the teaching workforce (see House of Representatives, 2007).

Thus, the context of teacher education in the new century is one that must acknowledge a discomfiting level of disagreement and concern about the aim and purpose of teacher education and the inevitable links made to the quality of outcomes for our students. As Cochran-Smith (2004) asserted, ‘teacher education in dangerous times’ requires us to ‘take stock’ of what she calls a convergence of factors, “...pushing us dangerously close to a technical view of teaching, a training model of teacher education, the isomorphic equating of

learning with testing....” (p.3). This paper proposes that the examination of teacher education should encompass research strategies to examine at least some of these concerns, as teacher education programmes, and indeed our ‘teachers for the future’, are not immune to the political and historical discourses circumscribing teacher education on a global scale. In particular, the qualities of people entering teacher education, their eventual success or attrition in the teaching career path, and the contributions they make to schooling are topics of burgeoning research scrutiny. Yet how these factors will change, or be influenced by the ‘dangerous times’ purported by Cochran-Smith (and certainly alluded to by others) remains of pivotal concern.

Recent research

This brief review of research demonstrates ways in which recent research and a plethora of reviews and inquiries have both served and attested to the ‘dangerous times’ purported by Cochran-Smith (2004). In the first instance it is unquestionable that teacher education has faced a seemingly interminable number of public inquiries and reviews about teaching, teacher education and quality schooling. One of the most seminal of these inquiries that presented an immediate impact on teacher education was *Quality matters*, the Report of the Review of Teacher Education, NSW (Ramsey, 2000). This report was primarily concerned with the professional standing of teachers and recommended that an Institute of Teachers be established in NSW. As we have seen, the Institute of Teachers has indeed emerged. Two issues were identified as being critical: first, “the need to improve the transition from teacher-in-training to fully-fledged teacher” (Ramsey, 2000, p. 14) and second, the development of professional leaders. The report noted that while traditional school to university pathways dominate modes of entry into teacher education, it might be valuable to develop alternative entry pathways in the interest of creating a more diverse teaching workforce. In a national survey of teacher supply and demand, Preston (2000) also urged faculties of education to develop mechanisms for accommodating alternate pathways into teacher education and to explore effective ways of supporting beginning teachers.

Further reports have noted the changing social environment and the impact that this will have on learning in the future. In their proposal *New Learning: A Charter for Australian Education* (Kalantzis, Cope, & Harvey, 2001), the Australian Council of Deans of Education advocated that, educational systems, the nature of knowledge, and the role of teachers, must

be rethought in an alternative model of 'New Learning' (Blaise & Elsdon-Clifton, 2007). In part, the New Learning perspective acknowledges a new knowledge economy in which Luke, Luke and Mayer (2000, as acknowledged by Blaise & Elsdon-Clifton, 2007), raised questions about the kinds of students and future citizens that we want our teachers and schools to shape, and the tools and processes through which these teachers and students would work . As Blaise and Elsdon-Clifton (2007) discovered, an experiment in working with the ideas of 'new learning' met with resistance from student teachers as they grappled with skills of collaboration and a focus on the process of learning itself.

While the *Inquiry into Public Education* (Vinson, Esson, & Johnston, 2002) was primarily concerned with asserting the importance of and strategies for rejuvenating public education, the inquiry also considered the key role played by teachers. The inquiry acknowledged that the issues of professionalism, a changing social environment and an emphasis on individual accountability combined to place increased demands on teachers. Such findings place further emphasis on the importance of pre-service teacher preparation programmes and the early years of a teacher's professional life. It remains to be seen however, how credentialing regimes and alternative pathways will serve to shape and foster the growth of teachers in the new knowledge economy.

Such concerns were highlighted in an extensive review of teacher education conducted by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). In particular Zumwalt and Craig (2005) conducted an extensive analysis of the demographic profile of teacher characteristics, which may serve to critically inform calls for alternative pathways into teacher education and the development of professional leaders. Their review of research conducted between 1985 and 2000, confirmed commonly held assumptions about those candidates entering the teaching workforce. This pool of candidates remains dominated by female teacher education students, particularly in the elementary school years; candidates continue to be drawn from predominantly white backgrounds, although diversity is increasing; and, although current candidates are more likely to have at least one college-graduated parent, teaching remains an upwardly mobile career choice for many candidates. While the investigation confirmed many common assumptions about the teaching workforce, these findings also highlighted the need to consider the impact of changing elements of the traditional demographic profile of teachers. New first-time teachers represent a larger and growing proportion of the workforce, and these teachers are more different than ever seen

before; they are more likely to be older, more diverse, and more likely to be male than those teachers of earlier years; most critically, these new teachers are more likely to find their first jobs in hard to staff, and lower performing schools (p.139), a finding which has been similarly noted in the Australian context (Ferfolja, 2008). Older teachers however, and those entering from alternative preparation pathways, some reports suggest, face the highest levels of attrition from the profession. As Zumwalt and Craig (2005) suggested, there remains a need to know how these demographic variables relate to teacher preparation, teaching placements and retention in the teaching workforce.

In the same report, Grossman (2005) also highlighted the need for a better understanding of teacher education pedagogy and how this might contribute to an understanding of the working lives of future teachers, their dispositions and skills that will inform their practice.

Certainly, a significant body of research about teachers working lives suggests that many of the challenges faced are those of a pedagogical nature. Sinclair (2008) summarises a range of factors discerned from the literature, that appear to shape retention and attrition from the profession. Although no factors are explicitly named as 'pedagogical factors', several factors are suggestive of areas encompassing the pedagogical work and concerns of teachers: 'student factors', which denotes being effective with students and motivating students; 'professional factors', which denotes the teacher's own professional development; and 'working conditions', which denotes the context and politics of the school, professional support, and no doubt could encompass the pedagogical ethos promulgated in school policies and the like. Sinclair's research went on to find, that among student teachers, their commitment to teaching was indeed affected by pedagogical aspects of course experiences and practicum, in which course experiences confirmed and solidified understanding of the nature of teaching work. In other cases however, the practicum experience, and potentially the earliest years of a teachers life can be one in which pedagogical and epistemological values can *negatively* shape and influence the teacher's wellbeing and satisfaction in the profession. Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore et al (2004) documented the tension arising in a student teacher who found a significant clash between the pedagogies and values she had been taught at university and those encountered in the practicum experience. In straddling these two worlds, Smagorinsky et al (2004) document a growing concern in the student teacher that she would eventually be forced to go over to the other 'side', and practice the traditionalist teaching approach enforced by her mentor teacher. In a related vein, Cavanagh and Prescott (2007) have also documented tensions between the teaching strategies promoted at university and student's experience of

practicum. Students reported that pedagogical strategies learned at university were rejected by their practicum teachers, who forced students to change lesson plans to more teacher-directed, “chalk and talk” modes of instruction and delivery. No doubt the vexations faced by these students are similar to those reported elsewhere by teachers in the earliest years of their teaching careers. As the teacher education profession moves into the ‘new learning’ times, it is likely that these vexations and discords could increase, and certainly the pedagogical tensions teachers face is worthy of much closer scrutiny and direct investigation.

Notwithstanding this climate of often negative inquiry, recent research in the Australian context shows that people entering the profession remain optimistic and confident. Significantly, this research has also considered the attitudes and beliefs of teachers from a variety of teacher education pathways. For example, Richardson & Watt (2006) reported few systematic differences in the beliefs and attitudes of students from undergraduate and graduate teacher education pathways. In fact both undergraduates and graduates shared a combination of what these researchers have called ‘social’ and ‘personal’ utility values. These pre-service teachers valued making a social contribution and shaping the future, alongside more pragmatic factors. This research found little support for the notion that school leavers or mature graduates (‘career switchers’) were entering teaching as a second university preference or as a ‘fall back’ career option. Rather, many spoke of a long held vocation and interest in the profession.

Similarly, Manuel and Hughes (2006) canvassed the views of students in the third year of their pre-service education programmes, finding that this group had predominantly entered teaching to achieve personal fulfilment, to work with young people or to ‘make a difference’. As these authors concluded, these findings clearly have implications for “...teacher satisfaction, teacher retention and teacher attrition” (2006, p. 20).

What is remarkable across these studies is that values and beliefs of undergraduates and graduate students appear more similar than they are dissimilar. However, as noted in the context of the United States, reported in the AERA review, we have little evidence to suggest how the changing demographics or motivations of those entering teacher education programmes actually influence their placement, practice or retention. If, as research suggests, attrition continues to remain a significant problem, it behoves us to question at what point the altruism, high motivation, and vocational interest is whittled away to the extent that people

leave the profession? This review highlights a range of social-political, demographic and pedagogical concerns that should serve to shape and extend future research in teacher education and beyond.

Study aims in the Macquarie context

Teacher education at Macquarie University is characterised by flexible modes of entry and degree progression. These flexible pathways to teacher education provide diverse cohorts of teacher education students including those following traditional school leaver pathways; those seeking 'add on' teacher qualifications; and those who may be more mature graduates or 'career switchers', looking to enter teacher education as a second or perhaps third career pathway. This diversity of teacher education students is by no means unusual or unique to the Macquarie context. Indeed, end-on degree structures such as Diplomas of Education and Masters of Teaching are offered by several NSW tertiary institutions. However, understanding of the needs and qualities of these diverse teacher education cohorts is rather equivocal. Notwithstanding this point, it is reasonable to inquire, if not expect, that differing cohorts of teacher education students might reflect different histories and cultural contexts. Beliefs and expectations about teachers and teacher education have certainly been well voiced in media and political contexts in the last decade. To what extent do these cultural contexts and diverse identities influence and shape the attitudes, beliefs and expectations of individuals entering teacher education at Macquarie University?

In regard to those more mature or 'career switcher' cohorts, it would seem particularly prudent to inquire about the unique histories and contextual factors shaping their decisions to enter teaching as a career path. While Richardson and Watt (2006), cited above, considered social and personal 'utility' values, we might also enquire as to the pedagogical or epistemological value systems of teachers. Would the pedagogical and epistemological beliefs of recent school leavers be very different to those of career switcher graduates, who perhaps bring the different perspectives in addition to their aspirations to teach?

There are also salient pragmatic factors that we might need to account for in the beliefs, attitudes and qualities of these cohorts of students. For example, do these more mature individuals have more knowledge and expectations regarding the nature of 'work' or perhaps

the 'career' pathways open to them in teaching? Would the career expectations of these individuals be shaped by knowledge of the intrinsic rewards commensurate with leadership attainments, and do these more 'mature' graduates have attributes and experience commensurate with leadership pathways? It seems particularly important to ask these questions in light of the research suggesting that these teachers might be vulnerable to attrition from the profession. Is it possible that a mismatch in expectations occurs when these graduates move from positions of responsibility or high achievement in another career to relative 'underling' or junior status in schools?

Most importantly, reports of growing problems in retaining teachers in the career path and increasing concern about problems attracting teachers to certain discipline areas, means that teacher education research at Macquarie (and further afield) must continue to ask sensitive and difficult questions about the various factors influencing and shaping our teachers of the future. Thus far, empirical research into the problem of teacher retention and early career dropout appears to have suffered from a retrospective research lens, in which various factors such as behaviour and discipline problems, school climate and culture are pointed at as potential sources of attrition and career dissatisfaction. These retrospective and 'snap shot' perspectives of current problems understandably neglect the origins and starting points of those affected individuals. It is essential that teacher education research adopt longitudinal and prospective designs in which the historical and cultural factors influencing the development and career contributions of our teacher graduates can be carefully accounted for.

In addressing the problems outlined in the preceding review of literature, the aims of this proposed research are to:

- Gain a better understand the relationship between the backgrounds, origins and pathways of our students in terms of social-demographic factors, mode of entry into teacher education, and the processes of achieving 'qualified' teacher status, including the practical and pedagogic learning experiences of these students;
- Consider the range of expectations held by students in terms of their anticipated roles and contributions to the profession;
- Conduct a longitudinal study of the experiences, attainments and attrition of different graduating cohorts.

Conclusion: The significance of teacher education research

In a climate of scrutiny and inquiry, research in teacher education has a significant role to play in studying, informing, and most importantly, *critiquing*, the broader discourses and socio-political climate that shapes the work of teacher educators. The findings from this research will have local and national significance. The Macquarie University Teacher Education Programme makes a significant contribution to the pool of teachers entering the workforce in NSW. At a national level, the teaching workforce suffers from significant attrition, estimated to be about 25% per annum (House of Representatives, 2007), and thus attrition is a considerable public cost and certainly exacts an enormous personal cost on the individual concerned. As a consequence of research, it is anticipated that we can develop strategies to enhance the strengths that students bring to teacher education and address these areas of concern. As new credentialing and testing regimes take effect, prospective longitudinal research will provide an essential insight into the 'dangerous times' purported by Cochran-Smith (2004), enabling us to 'take stock' and plan for the future.

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