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Bodies of knowledge: The concept of embodiment as an alternative to theory/practice debates in the preparation of teachers

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Summarises the enduring theory/practice divide in teacher education.
- Phenomenological study of graduates' sense of preparedness to teach.
- Teacher education graduates' sense of preparation equated with 'being knowledgeable'.
- Offers the concept of embodiment as an alternative to theory/practice debates.
- Recommends paying attention to the felt experience of learning to teach.

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ABSTRACT

The theory/practice divide is a persistent theme in teacher education research. This article reports on a phenomenological study of thirteen newly-qualified teachers across their first two years of teaching and their sense of preparedness to teach. Analysis of interviews with the teachers suggested they equated 'being prepared' with 'being knowledgeable', with being knowledgeable described in embodied terms, rather than as knowledge held 'in the head'. We argue that the concept of embodiment, particularly as it has been taken up within the 'practice turn' in teacher education, offers a potential alternative to long-standing theory/practice entanglements in debates about learning to teach.

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1. Introduction

The need to overcome the theory/practice gap, also known as the technical/rational divide, is a persistent theme in discourses of teacher education. In this article we make a case for an alternative conceptualisation of learning to teach, one that attempts to transcend, rather than overcome, theory/practice debates. We propose the concept of *embodiment* as a lens through which learning to teach might be understood and as a way of thinking through teacher education's long-standing theory to practice idealisation. Our argument draws on the central finding of a doctoral study that explored teacher education students' sense of preparedness for teaching (Ord, 2011). Although the study was conducted in early

childhood education, we argue that the claims we make here about the embodied nature of learning to teach are applicable to teacher education in general, a point we return to in our conclusion.

We begin by touching on contemporary critiques of the efficacy of teacher education, before engaging in greater depth with the literature on the relationship between theory and practice in learning to teach. The study from which our data are drawn (Ord, 2011) is described next, including our approach to data generation and analysis. In the second half of the article, drawing on data contributed by the study's participants, we show how most of the participants equated their sense of preparedness with 'being knowledgeable', seeing this as an effect of teacher education. However we also show that, in seeking to constitute themselves as increasing in knowledge as their teacher education programme progressed, they spoke increasingly of knowledge as integrated and embodied, rather than in consciously cognitive terms. In discussing this finding, we explore the utility of embodiment as a construct for understanding why newly graduated teachers might appear to call

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for more practice in teacher education programmes. We conclude by arguing that the concept of embodiment, particularly in the way it is taken up within the ‘practice turn’ in teacher education (Reid, 2011), raises useful questions about the nature of knowledge and offers another way of thinking about long-standing theory/practice entanglements in debates about learning to teach.

2. Learning to teach as the application of theory to practice

The research was conducted within a climate of mounting critiques of the efficacy of teacher education programmes within Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere, which persist into the present (see Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2015; Rowan, Mayer, Kline, Kostogriz, & Walker-Gibbs, 2015; Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group [TEMAG], 2015; Zeichner, 2014). Many of these critiques emanate from public policy contexts and have been linked to neoliberal arguments about the nature and purposes of education (Zeichner, 2014), but teacher education researchers themselves are also eager to ensure the effectiveness of teacher education. As Cochran-Smith et al. (2015) assert, “researchers around the world are now intensely interested in the systems and processes through which teachers are prepared and certified to teach” (p. 117). At the centre of these concerns is the question of how to conceptualise, design, and enact (Rowan et al., 2015) programmes of teacher education so that teacher education graduates enter the workplace and the profession as capable teachers. These concerns engage with a set of enduring problems in teacher education, including problems of complexity and enactment (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005), which have repeatedly been identified in studies where recently graduated teachers have reported that they felt underprepared to teach.

Louden (2008) attributes contemporary concerns about the “uncertainty of impact” (p. 358) of teacher education “in part [to] the consistently poor reviews new graduates give in their first few years of employment” (p. 358). When asked to identify ways in which teacher education programmes could be improved, 43% of participants in a study by Louden and Rohl (2006, cited Louden, 2008, p. 358) said they wanted more practical ideas and strategies. This desire hints at what Grudnoff and Tuck (2002, 2003) call the ‘discontinuity problem’ in teacher education, which they describe as a tension between differing forms of knowledge – ‘craft’ knowledge versus ‘formal’ knowledge in their analysis – that teachers are equipped with through teacher education. They argue that the question of balance between these forms of knowledge arises because pre-service teachers tend to value craft knowledge, while teacher educators favour formal knowledge. This tendency of teacher educators is premised on discourses of the critically reflective teacher, who is seen as requiring a strong foundation of formal knowledge against which they are able to be reflective (Grudnoff & Tuck, 2002). However Grudnoff and Tuck (2002) also acknowledge that the “ability of the beginning teacher to be innovative and critical will be inhibited” (p. 4) if too much attention is paid to formal knowledge and that “in an ideal world students would learn significant elements of craft knowledge before graduating” (p. 2).

Policy responses to the enduring idea that teacher education graduates lack craft or practical knowledge typically recommend more time in practice settings and closer engagement between schools and teacher education providers as solutions (e.g. TEMAG, 2015). But such suggestions side-step more fundamental questions about the nature of knowledge for teaching, and remain caught in persistent notions of theory and practice (at least in the way they are used in teacher education) that signify an epistemological distinction between ‘knowing’ (as a mental process) and ‘doing’ (as a physical process). Connelly and Clandinin (2000), for

example, have described this distinction as knowledge *for* teachers and knowledge *of* teachers, and a number of similar terms have historically been suggested in the teacher education literature (see, for example, Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). These ways of knowing have their roots in the Cartesian separation between mind and body (Lampert, Beasley, Ghouseini, Kazemi, & Franke, 2010) and implicitly contain a discursive hierarchy between forms of knowledge. For example, ‘knowing’ is associated with terms such as formal, procedural, or abstract knowledge, while ‘doing’ is assigned characteristics such as practical, perceptual, or informal knowledge.

The knowing/doing dichotomy in teacher education is a reflection of a traditional conceptualisation of learning to teach as a process of applying theory to practice (Korthagen, 2001; Lampert, 2010; Zeichner, 2010), sometimes described as ‘the transfer problem’ (Kennedy, 1999) or the theory/practice ‘gap’. As Rowan and colleagues have argued:

Literature in this field has drawn attention to a commonly cited ‘gap’ between the theory required by universities and the practice demanded in schools and the potential for early career teachers to devalue ‘university’ knowledge and to celebrate, instead, the ‘real world’ knowledge found in schools. (Rowan et al., 2015, p.285, p.285)

Zeichner (2010) has termed this the “historically dominant ‘application of theory’ model of preservice teacher education” (p. 90). We argue this model has been both underpinned and undermined by a misreading of Schön’s seminal work on reflection *in* and *on* action (Schön, 1983). Although Schön was offering a critique of technical-rational models of professional education, the extensive literature on reflective practice in teacher education is dominated by descriptions of reflection as a mental process occurring *after* action has occurred (reflection *on*) and therefore decontextualized and disembodied from the teachers’ direct experience. In this model teacher education programmes supply the formal knowledge and the student applies it to their classroom practice. Although this is something of a simplification of the reality of the teacher education classroom, it captures the essence of the approach. That teacher education programmes are weighted toward the development of particular forms of knowledge is arguably not a recent phenomenon. For example, in 1997 Russell identified how an increased focus on knowledge for teachers in teacher education programmes could be termed the ‘content turn’, while Zeichner, 2003 linked an increased emphasis on formal knowledge to a professionalization agenda. As Cochran-Smith and Fries (2005) have argued, teacher education has increasingly positioned itself over the past two decades as concerning itself with “produc[ing] knowledgeable professional teachers” (p. 87), an agenda aligned to the identification and codification of a knowledge-base for teaching. These changes are been identified by some researchers as linked to wider agendas to do with modernist reforms in teacher education (Edwards, Gilroy, & Hartley, 2002) and with the 20th century’s modernist project in general (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007).

Despite the dominance of the theory/practice discourse historically, there have been attempts to challenge the concept of a ‘gap’ and to develop alternative conceptualisations of learning to teaching. Edwards (2000) has argued that the theory (i.e. grounded in research knowledge) to practice discourse has set up “false expectations” (p. 185) about the relationship between the two, principally that knowledge is relatively easily transferred to practice. Wells (2002) similarly criticises the notion of knowledge understood as a discrete ‘object’, passed from one person to the next “simply by giving them the ‘knowledge object’” (p. 206). Other researchers have argued that constituting one’s identity as a teacher is a far more complex than simply applying theory to

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