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Looking at 'both sides' of teacher education research and policy-making: insights for the teacher education research community

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ABSTRACT

Teacher education researchers appear generally not well equipped to maximise a range of dissemination strategies, and remain largely separated from the policy implications of their research. How teacher education researchers address this issue and communicate their research to a wider public audience is more important than ever to consider within a global political discourse where teacher education researchers appear frustrated that their findings should, but do not, make a difference; and where the research they produce is often marginalised. This paper seeks to disrupt the widening gap between teacher education researchers and policy-makers by looking at the issue from 'both sides'. The paper examines policy-research tensions and the critique of teacher education researchers and then outlines some of the key findings from an Australian policy-maker study. Recommendations are offered as a way for teacher education researchers to begin to mobilise a new set of generative strategies to draw from.

INTRODUCTION

There is wide agreement on the important, and indeed urgent, need to 'bridge the divides between research and policy' (Cochran-Smith 2005, p. 6) and for 'policy based on sound research' (p. 4). This desire is commonly shared by politicians, policy-makers, teachers, academics and the broader public alike, with calls for more

research to help address the complex education issues society faces. In my own country, Australia, this desire is evident in a recent review of initial teacher education recommending 'a national focus on research into teacher education' (TEMAG 2015, p.9) and highlighting an urgent need to establish a 'research focus on the effectiveness and impact of teacher

education' (p.10). In particular, the recommendation from the Advisory Group states:

that a national focus on research into the effectiveness of initial teacher education programs is needed. Research should focus on building an evidence base to inform the design of initial teacher

KEYWORDS

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education programs and teacher professional development (p.48).

The attention and spotlight on the important role of research on teacher education is clearly important and most welcome to the Australian teacher education research community and beyond. Indeed further research on, in as well as for teacher education, (see for example, Mayer 2014), are all vitally important, as too is the knowledge mobilisation of such research into policy and practice. Such explorations of the connections between research and policy are particularly necessary since, as Wiseman (2012) notes, ‘we must operate from a research-rich foundation that informs our efforts’ (p. 90), and in order to better understand and strengthen the research–policy–practice connection. Communicating effectively the complexity, findings and implications of any research is critical. As Cochran-Smith (2005) reminds us:

The education research community needs to make it clearer to the public and to policymakers that there are significant complexities in what happens to policies on their way, as Susan Fuhrman (2001) puts it, from “capitols to classrooms.” These complexities depend on the cultures and contexts of schools, the resources available, and the neighborhoods, communities, and larger environments where schools are located (p.14).

For teacher education researchers it now becomes a question of how to communicate their findings in a noisy policy environment, with politicians hungry for research ‘solutions’ to perceived ‘policy problems’ (Cochran-Smith 2004). Teacher education researchers currently appear generally not well equipped to maximise a range of dissemination strategies, and remain largely uninformed about the impact of public perceptions, and the resulting policy implications, of their own research. How teacher education researchers can more effectively communicate their

research and explain policy-research ‘complexities’ is more important than ever within a political discourse where teacher education researchers appear frustrated that their findings should (but do not) make a difference and: where the research they produce is often marginalised or viewed as increasingly disconnected from policy and practice. While the frustration continues, so too does the intensified critique of teacher education researchers from governments and the public (see Zeichner, Payne & Brayko, 2015).

This paper endeavours to contribute to the conversation on how, as an international teacher education research community, we might both face the critique and mobilise a new set of generative strategies for teacher education researchers to draw from.

A GROWING CRITIQUE OF TEACHER EDUCATION RESEARCHERS AND THEIR RESEARCH

While there is an urgent and explicit need for research to inform policy, as outlined above, there appear to be two main critiques that teacher education researchers need to face and then address. Whether the critique is fair or justified is not the main purpose of this paper to debate – other scholars are laying out carefully the issues of such critique (see, eg, Berliner 2000, 2006; Zeichner, 2014). Rather this paper aims to contribute to the discussion in a different way by adopting an ‘activist’ stance as framed by Apple (2015), using the critique to better understand the research–policy disconnect and then work at multiple levels to create new spaces to (re)position the place of research within policy reforms and debates.

Two main critiques appear pervasive. The first expresses the growing suspicion that teacher education researchers are resistant to policy reforms, promote their own agenda, and adopt a defensive

position within initial teacher education research (Zeichner et al. 2015). The second is a critique of the inability of teacher education researchers to communicate in an effective and timely way and to articulate plainly to a public audience their research findings to meet the urgent timelines of policy-makers and address the ‘public problems’ they seek to solve (Rickinson et al. 2011). In short, these criticisms go to the heart of ‘what is the good of’ the research we do and the legacy of the ‘research footprint’ (White & Corbett 2014) we leave.

Nearly a decade ago Whitty (2006) summarised some of the central government criticisms of education researchers within the UK context as ‘a failure to produce cumulative findings; ideological bias; irrelevance to schools; a lack of involvement of teachers; and inaccessibility and poor dissemination’ (p.161). More recently both Cochran-Smith et al (2015) and Zeichner et al (2015) in the US context described increasing criticism of teacher education researchers similar to those above. Further, Zeichner et al (2015) note that researchers (usually located within the universities) are perceived and defined as ‘defenders’ (p.122) of the status quo in teacher education and are associated with research not focused on the interests of the public, or are thought to be unable to translate and mobilise their research to speak to policy.

The critique has become louder, particularly on the part of those defined by Zeichner et al (2015) as ‘reformers’ (p.122) keen to ‘challenge’ traditional initial teacher education by opening it up to market forces and deregulation. Reforms are increasingly being driven instead by private enterprise and venture capitalists (Sahlberg, 2011; Zeichner & Peña-Sandoval 2015) who are jumping into the resulting gap and pushing what could be viewed as their own market agendas by financing particular interventions often framed around social justice issues. Problematically, many of

these funding initiatives while aimed at addressing public good are actually producing a widening and ‘continuing educational achievement gap’ (Cochran-Smith 2008, p. 272). The divide or binary that exists between ‘defenders and reformers’ plays out in further confusing the policy–research connection, with each side constructing the ‘other’ as ideological while stating their own research is empirical. As Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) notes:

‘Each positions its own case as if it were neutral, a-political, and value-free, based solely on the empirical and certified facts of the matter and not embedded within or related to a particular agenda that is political or ideological.’ (p.6).

Adopting a defender position or ‘a reactive stance to critiques of teacher education is not desirable’ (Wiseman 2012, p.90), nor does it appear to be effective. The current landscape of ‘pointing fingers’ meanwhile, has dire consequences for many under-served students and communities, particularly those from low-socio-economic and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (see Cochran-Smith et al, 2013 and Zeichner, 2014). This group, while often the focus of policy reform, appears to be slipping further behind students from upper and middle class backgrounds, who are able to ‘perform’ and compete more easily within a ‘choice and marketisation’ agenda (Apple 2001; 2015).

Further complicating the consequences of these issues results in policy reforms created from public discourse, popular and personal opinions, and ideology, rather than from research and empirical evidence. As Wiseman (2012) cautions:

Policy is more likely to emerge from public perceptions, based on isolated anecdotes or support for recent educational fads or initiatives. In more cases than not, policy emerges quickly and without the benefit of research before or after mandated innovations are implemented. (p.90)

To address this stand-off and its serious implications, teacher education researchers are being called on to consider alternative approaches (see, eg, Cochran-Smith 2005; Zeichner 2010; Apple 2015). Wiseman (2012) suggests a ‘proactive stance [one that] requires that we critically examine our current response and the important role that scholarship can play as calls for change echo throughout our profession’ (p. 90). Zeichner et al. (2015), Lipman (2013) and Ellis & McNicholl (2015) all note a need to reject the ‘reform/defend dichotomy and [move] towards a transformative agenda’ (p. ix) instead. In an initial attempt to take seriously this call for an alternative approach against the tide of critique, I embarked on a small qualitative study of Australian policy-makers to begin to try and understand more about their views on teacher research and researchers.

This study seeks to take up the call for a ‘future-oriented and simultaneously theoretical and practical’ (Ellis & McNicholl, 2015) approach to bridging the existing disconnect between policy and research. It takes seriously the critique of teacher education researchers above, and, instead, endeavours to create a collectively research-rich and informed ‘systems’ approach, working with a variety of stakeholders, starting with policy-makers.

AUSTRALIAN POLICY-MAKER STUDY

It is important to note that the study was not an attempt to (re)position research or researchers as the sole servant of government policy, but rather to seize the opportune time that the current policy platform provides. As such, policy-makers were invited to participate in a qualitative study designed to understand their work, role and current use of research. A particular focus was given to understanding the challenges they faced in utilising research, and their advice and ideas were sought on what they identified could be improved. A total of 20 policy-

makers (located in either national or state-based jurisdictions) agreed to participate. Ten men and ten women were interviewed between August and December 2014. A more comprehensive and complementary discussion of the study itself, the methodology used and data analysis is provided in another publication (White 2016). Within the current paper I focus specifically on policy-makers’ views of their use of research and their advice to teacher education researchers. Their responses reveal the possibilities of new spaces for teacher education researchers to enter into generative and collaborative conversations and endeavours.

‘ADVICE’ TO TEACHER EDUCATION RESEARCHERS

Policy-makers described three main barriers to utilising teacher education research: accessibility, relevance and generalisability. Not surprisingly, these findings echo earlier critiques highlighted from research by Whitty (2006) and by Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) with data revealing a critique of a lack of rigour, inaccessibility and poor dissemination in small-scale, localised teacher education studies (Cochran-Smith, 2009, p. 351).

Policy-makers found it difficult to physically locate and access research produced by teacher education researchers without the appropriate free library access from which academics benefit. In this absence, policy-makers tended to turn instead to research located on the internet that was freely available and that had often been ‘pushed’ to them via a social media tool. They explained that they needed to be able to access research evidence quickly and that they used keywords in their online searches and sometimes sourced the names of researchers who they knew had been working on a particular policy topic. They added that while they understood research took time, their own time and work pressures meant that they could not necessarily wait for the final report or

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publication, and they suggested interim findings or ‘research findings shared at key points’ of the research work might be ways to address this issue. As one policy-maker exclaimed, ‘we want research to inform something. If it’s not there by the time it’s done it would be too late.’

This point again is consistent with what Rickinson et al. (2011) found, noting the ‘divergent timescales of policy, practice and research are an on-going challenge’ (p. 87). In essence what policy-makers were seeking was researchers to do much more of the work in knowledge translation and knowledge mobilisation rather than just focus on knowledge production.

‘Policy makers require research to be presented in ways that are jargon-free, succinct and give concrete illustrations. So researchers need to use and communicate their expertise in new ways.’ (Rickinson et al. 2011, p.83)

This sense of urgency and time pressure, whereby policy-makers need to make decisions and respond to stakeholder consultation quickly, might also explain the tendency for policy-makers and politicians to source ‘like’ organisations to themselves, for example ‘think tanks, gurus and commissions’ (Rigby 2005), all of which use more direct and ‘push’ tactics that are attractive to policy-makers. Think-tanks in particular, or institutes (unlike universities), tend to provide ‘free’ access to research on a wide range of relevant topics. Research formats that sit on many of the institutes are also packaged in far more attractive and accessible ways. They come with a particular genre style containing keywords and an executive summary. Visual tools are used to explain and illustrate findings, and the latter are set out in a language that is more readily accessible than what one policy-maker described as ‘this thumping great research thing’. Teacher education researchers could consider adopting multiple alternative genres for the research publications stemming from their scholarly work.

While many policy-makers regarded research as vitally important for their work, many also revealed a lack of research literacy and wanted to know more. This opens up another opportunity for teacher education researchers to provide the platform for policy-makers and other stakeholders in this process. Many policy-makers also reflected on the complexity of doing research and understood the issues faced by teacher education researchers in responding to the questions they were seeking to understand. This particular policy-maker notes here her desire for a deeper discussion with researchers about their work, seeking, in essence, a deeper probing and understanding of what she describes as often ‘simplistic research findings’:

‘If I see one more report on initial teacher education that talks about graduate teachers not being confident in classroom management or teaching diverse classes. I mean, how many times do we need to be told that? How much research do we need that tells us that before something happens? So the question then is how can policy influence that? Now, we’re coming from a jurisdiction focus and looking at universities. So how do we strengthen the link so that changes why that is the case? I keep reading that it is, but why? What is or isn’t happening in courses and what could happen through initial teacher education that would actually address the issue? So it seems to me we keep identifying the issues but we don’t necessarily come up with the strategies to overcome those issues. So I think – I mean, in terms of – we do look at research in terms of our policy but then when it comes to initial teacher education policies they’re a bit more challenging and so we have to look at how we can influence and encourage the changes to be made. But we would be using the research to do that.’

In some ways this policy-maker acknowledges what Whitty (2006) has noted already:

‘Some research therefore needs to ask different sorts of questions, including why something works and, equally important, why it works in some contexts and not in others.’ (p.162).

One of the overarching themes raised by the policy-makers was their need for a closer and more constructive ‘dialogue’ with teacher education researchers. This was evident in that they wanted to have ongoing conversations with the teacher education research community – not as some described with ‘fly-in, fly-out researchers’ – and strongly recommended the involvement of both groups at all stages of policy setting and research development. Reciprocal learning relationships would benefit both groups, with teacher education researchers requiring a greater awareness of policy timeframes, and policy-makers needing further research literacy skills. Recommendations suggest policy-makers and practitioners should be involved at all stages of the research process to maximise the benefits. This rings true from a study by Lomas et al. (2005) on health policy-makers that noted research is more likely to be used in policy if policy-makers have been involved in its development.

The need to express research in new ways is a key finding of this study and speaks directly back to the criticism of teacher education researchers. Teacher education researchers need to consider these ideas and strategies and they need the broader support of their colleagues, and deans of education faculties, to recognise research dissemination beyond the current academic productivity measures such as books and journal publications. Research and scholarly work recognised and rewarded in the academy is often not recognised as relevant or useful by the schools, school systems and governments making policy decisions about the funding and governance of teacher education. Teacher education practice and research can also occupy a lower status (Reid 2011), with research and practice in professional experience or the practicum

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having an even lower status (Le Cornu & Ewing 2008), resulting in academics not pursuing this vitally important field of research and practice. This issue needs to be addressed quickly. Rickinson et al. (2011) explain this as a need to improve the infrastructure surrounding the connections between researchers and policy-makers. They suggest:

This is about taking seriously the ways in which users and researchers' careers structures, training provision, institutional incentives and professional standards could better support research collaboration and engagement. User engagement with research needs to be developed within the infrastructure of government, public and other services. (p.128)

CONCLUSION: TRANSFORMING THE RESEARCH–POLICY CONNECTION

While the study briefly reported on in this paper is admittedly very small and much more investigation is needed, the policy-makers' responses reveal potential for generative and transformative strategies for the teacher education research community to consider and then utilise to strengthen the research–policy connection. Positioning ourselves as 'defenders' to date does not appear to work. Zeichner et al. (2015) offer an alternative position and agenda, a third group, known as 'transformers' – a mix of stakeholders working in and across a variety of settings. The study itself is an attempt to contribute to a 'transformational' teacher education agenda by using research (currently unhelpfully positioned from an 'either/or' perspective) in a more inclusive 'both and also' approach consistent with a 'transformative reframing' (Ellis & McNicholl 2015, p. ix).

Two messages are overwhelmingly clear to me. The first is that teacher education researchers need to create new genres and approaches to disseminate research

in ways that speak with, and back to, policy in productive ways. As Apple (2015) provocatively stated in his recent keynote to the European Conference on Educational Research, 'if we can't say it clearly, we don't understand it ourselves'. New forms of dissemination need to be created and rewarded beyond the mechanisms traditionally adopted by academics. Early-career researchers also need to be better prepared and supported in new dissemination models and approaches.

The second message is that research needs to take centre stage, and policy-makers and teacher education researchers (along with other stakeholders) need to look for alternative approaches to link together in an ongoing rather than one-off approach. These ideas and suggestions interestingly have much in common with recommendations from the final report of the BERA–RSA (2014) inquiry into the role of research in teacher education. The statement below offers the platform from which a new transformative connection can be forged:

Drawing on the evidence, the inquiry concludes that amongst policymakers and practitioners there is considerable potential for greater dialogue than currently takes place, as there is between teachers, teacher-researchers and the wider research community. It also concludes that everybody in a leadership position – in the policy community, in university departments of education, at school or college level or in key agencies within the educational infrastructure – has a responsibility to support the creation of the sort of research-rich organisational cultures in which these outcomes, for both learners and teachers, can be achieved (BERA–RSA 2014, p.8). ■

Revisiting the article, Looking at 'both sides' of teacher education research and policy-making: Insights for the teacher education research community, little has changed for the teacher education research community. While the world we live in has significantly changed due to the pandemic, for those in teacher education, the backdrop continues to be one of tightening regulation, increased scrutiny, testing and standardisation on the one hand and on the other, widening socio-economic divides, greater diversification of students and their family's needs and, continued technological disruption and the marketisation of education (Whitty & Furlong, 2017).

Like many other OECD Countries (in particular the US and England), Australia has continued to experience an increasingly concerning teacher shortage, putting even more pressure on the profession to allow those not yet fully qualified to commence in classrooms while they complete their studies. This in turn is leading to more required of schools to have various support mechanisms in place, in the form of mentoring and coaching for under-qualified or newly qualified teachers. This issue is particularly felt in regional, rural and remote schools already experiencing challenges brought about by socio-economic forces (White, 2019). Teacher education researchers continue to lament their research is not listened to or taken up in meaningful ways; while policy makers have become even louder in their call for research that addresses 'public problems' and dismissive of 'academics' who are perceived as out of touch.

In the article, I argued for a transformative approach, encompassing an 'and/also' strategy to address this issue. By this I explained that teacher education researchers should diversify the ways in which they disseminated their findings, moving beyond traditional journals that policy makers seldom can access

and read. I called for new models of incentivising publishing using multiple genres, by those in higher education leadership positions and I explained that a greater focus on supporting early career academics to be mentored in different mediums was needed. The pandemic might be an unlikely ally to realise these recommendations. Most recently, the pandemic has led to a greater scrutiny of the machinations of Universities in the Australian context. The Australian Prime

Minister recently called for Universities to play a more active role in translational research; research he called that would make a direct difference to our social-emotional and economic well-being as a country.

There has been a swift political critique of the higher education metric system that witness Universities overly focused on rising the international league tables via publishing in highly ranked journals

set behind paywalls. While teacher education researchers might not have been at the forefront of their thinking, this political shift in rhetoric to what has been deemed ‘the entrepreneurial academic’ might herald a way for teacher education researchers to move into their own lane and build new approaches to share and disseminate their research and in turn support a research-rich teaching profession (White et al 2020, White, 2021). ■

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