

Shifting conceptualisations of knowledge in teacher education: Collaborative research, partnerships and power

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and critically considers a collaborative research project that explores shifting conceptualisations of knowledge, teaching and learning in initial and continuing teacher education. The project is located in contexts of national curriculum change, with a newly implemented revised national curriculum for schools, and institutional change that is the result of the merger of Christchurch College of Education and the University of Canterbury. The research project is outlined, including its theoretical foundations and methodology. Preliminary critical observations are made about the opportunities afforded and challenges presented by collaborative action research in relation to knowledge re-conceptualisation, research partnerships and power relations.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper describes a Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) funded collaborative research project, conducted over a two-year period and involving a group of teacher educators at the College of Education, University of Canterbury. The project is ongoing and currently in its second year. It has brought together participants who have a mutual interest in teacher education, through academic and research activities and through their work as teacher educators in initial and continuing teacher education programmes. It is being conducted in a context of institutional and curriculum change.

Historically and until relatively recently, the bulk of teacher education in Aotearoa/New Zealand was conducted within autonomous Colleges of Education. Recent political changes have seen the merging of these Colleges of Education with Universities, so that teacher education is now conducted within the Universities rather than Colleges of Education¹. The most recent institutional mergers include that of the merger of the Christchurch College of Education with the University of Canterbury on 1 January 2007. This merger, as with others, has brought together people from different fields, including traditional academic education, initial teacher education and teacher professional development. A characteristic of mergers is tension between different institutional cultures, located partly in different knowledge foundations and differential valuing of different forms of knowledge – theoretical, research, practice and practitioner-based – and contested ideas about the nature and form of teacher education (Jesson, 2007; Snook, 2007). The merger moves are underpinned by ideas that university-based and research-led teacher education will improve teaching effectiveness, although it has been argued that these ideas are themselves articles of faith about different forms of knowledge, rather than outcomes that have been proven and are supported by research (Strathdee, 2005).

At the same time, there have been changes in the national curriculum for schools. The recently revised and mandated New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) (Ministry of Education, 2007) provides a re-focused

¹ Teacher education is not the exclusive domain of universities in Aotearoa/New Zealand. A range of private and other tertiary providers also deliver teacher education programmes.

curriculum for schools. This new curriculum is shaped in part by discourses of knowledge societies and postmodernity (Andreotti, Fa'afai, & Giroux, forthcoming). It incorporates principles, values and key competencies that emphasise critical thinking, a futures focus, sustainability goals, and recognition and valuing of learner diversity, amongst a range of guiding and overarching ideas. These ideas are intended to infuse all learning areas (disciplines).

These institutional and policy changes have provided a unique opportunity for teacher educators to explore conceptualisations of knowledge in different curriculum domains and to question what they think teaching is and what it could and should be about within different disciplines, and the role of teacher educators in shaping future schooling practices. This thinking and reflection has been facilitated by the TLRI research project on shifting conceptualisations of knowledge, teaching and learning that is described and discussed herein. The multilayered project includes a collection of nine case studies that engage teacher educators (practitioner researchers) in research relating to their own practice and a meta-analysis of the project by three researchers associated with the project. The case study component is a collaboration between teacher educators from different academic backgrounds, disciplines and domains of teacher education, including initial teacher education and continuing education (teacher professional development). The situated nature and the collaborative character of the research provide a vehicle to explore challenges of action research relating to knowledge reconceptualisation and the research partnerships and power relations involved in such research. Initial thoughts on these themes, from the perspective of one of three researchers involved in the project, are presented in this paper.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Theoretical arguments related to societal changes in knowledge societies and to postmodernity emphasise a need for reconceptualisations of knowledge and learning in educational policies and practices in contemporary twenty-first century societies (Andreotti & Souza, 2008; Gilbert, 2005; Hargreaves, 2003). The concept of “knowledge societies” encompasses broad social, ethical and political dimensions. It recognises cultural and linguistic diversity, along with which goes valuing of new and traditional forms of knowledge and fostering of diversity and creativity. A social justice rationale supports the aspiration that knowledge societies integrate all members and promote new forms of solidarity within societies, fostering knowledge sharing. This is notwithstanding the precaution that there are profound inequalities and knowledge gaps between countries and between social groups within countries that may be sustained and exacerbated by information technology developments and by inequalities of access and capacity to assimilate the flow of new information (UNESCO, 2005). This multi-dimensional view of knowledge societies goes beyond the notion of information societies based on technological breakthroughs and technologically deterministic views of social and economic development. Education is given central importance as a means of encouraging critical thinking and building socially just knowledge societies (UNESCO, 2005).

Postmodern theory supports the development of “forms of pedagogy that incorporate difference, plurality, and the language of the everyday as central to the production and legitimation of learning” (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 187). Informed by theory relating to postmodernism and knowledge societies, attempts to reconceptualise education for the twenty-first century include calls to redefine what it means to achieve (Gilbert, 2008) and what it means to be a learner or a teacher (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008), to equip learners to be producers rather than consumers of knowledge (Gilbert, 2005), to engage differently with new technologies (Kellner & Share, 2007), and to create transformative rather than transmissive forms of education (Sterling, 2001). A critique of the twenty-first century learning discourse suggests that the language of twenty-first century learning may be appropriated and used to advance neo liberal agendas rather than postmodern understandings. The high economic, cultural and political value placed on the capacity to generate knowledge and to develop and use new technologies may sustain agendas relating to the development of competitive economic advantage, maximisation of human capital and the hegemony of techno-scientific models of knowledge. This represents a different face of modernity

rather than something radically new or different (Bauman, 2000, 2005). Such arguments are important for understanding the ideological nature of the twenty-first century discourse. However, notwithstanding the importance of these arguments, appropriation of the twenty-first century discourse in specific contexts provides opportunities to think differently about education, teaching and learning and to equip educators to address complexity, contingency, diversity and uncertainty in their practice (Andreotti et al., forthcoming).

Theoretical understandings of twenty-first century learning have implications for education in schools and for teacher education and professional development. It is argued that the profile of learners has changed and that the sort of education that is needed by young people in complex, uncertain and globally connected contemporary societies is different to the kind of education that many teachers and teacher educators experienced in their own schooling. Consequently, there is a need for teachers and teacher educators to reflect on and to shift how they know and see as well as what they do as educators. These are epistemological and ontological concerns (Andreotti & Souza, 2008; Gilbert, 2005; Hargreaves, 2003; Hipkins, 2007). A central premise of the TLRI research project is that if teachers and teacher educators can acquire and use more and different lenses to understand the curriculum, learners, and the work of teachers, then they will be better equipped to respond to complexity and diversity in a rapidly changing world and to create more meaningful learning for students in schools (Andreotti, 2007). An aim of the project is to engage teacher educators with different ideas about knowledge, teaching and learning and to consider ways in which these new understandings might inform practice.

III. METHODOLOGY

As already signalled, the project is multi-layered and draws together teacher educators as participant-researchers and researchers who are interested in exploring education practices and possibilities for change through collaborative endeavour. Central to the project design are nine case studies relating to nine practitioner researchers. These participants are engaged in: a) exploring ideas relating to knowledge, teaching and learning in the context of their discipline or field of work; b) designing pedagogical initiatives that challenge ideas about knowledge, teaching and learning and are implemented in their specific curriculum and work contexts; c) researching and reflecting on their own practice and the influence of their pedagogical initiative on training teachers and teachers with whom they work (see Figure 1).

This collaborative, practice-oriented approach resonates with the broad principles of action research. Practitioners are involved in systematic inquiries related to their own fields of practice. This bridges the space between research and practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Noffke & Somekh, 2009) and shows commitment to personal and professional reflection and development (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Somekh, 1995), which are features of action research. The findings from the case study initiatives are intended to feed back into practice and bring about change, both directly through the work of the practitioner-researchers and indirectly through potential influence of policy and the work of other educators. Also consistent with action research principles, the research is pragmatic. It is focused on practitioner needs and is located within political and organizational structures that can both enable and limit what can be done (Somekh, 1995). The research is not prescriptive in terms of a predetermined approach to the case study research that is based on cycles of action and reflection. Rather it allows participants to develop initiatives and reflect on these in ways that are meaningful for them, respecting individuals' different interests and backgrounds and the diversity of contexts within which people work and consistent with a postmodern philosophy that recognises complexity and different ways of knowing or coming to understand what is happening.

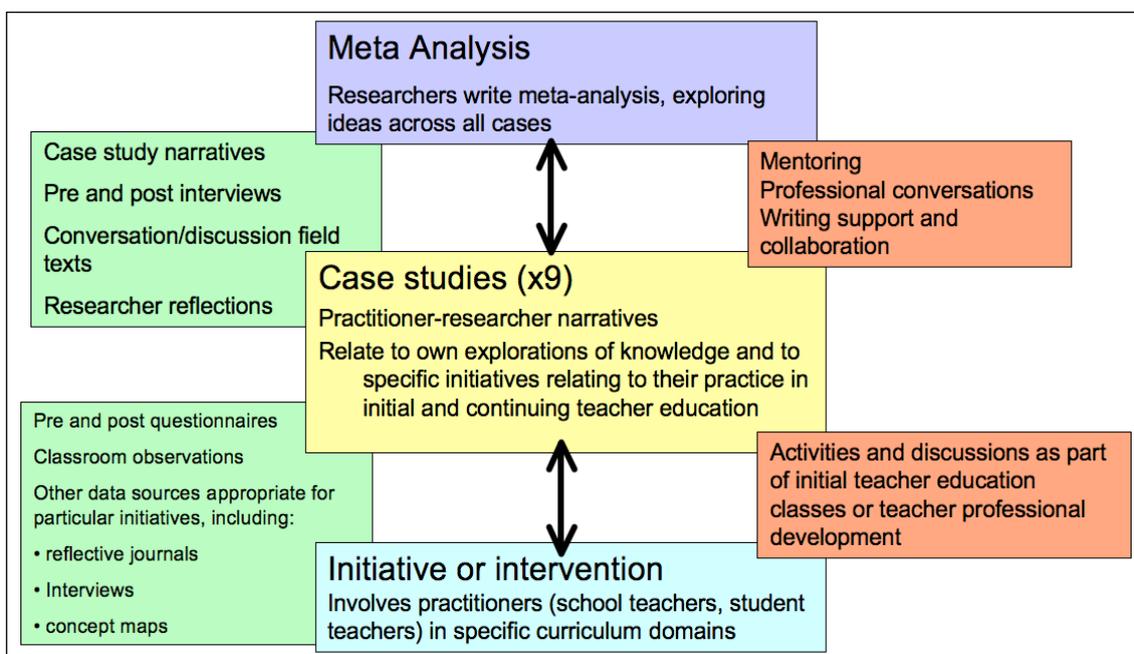


Figure 1. Research structure

It needs to be noted that the project was never identified and labelled as “action research” at its inception, being conceived rather as a collaborative and multi-layered project to explore theoretical understandings and conceptualisations of knowledge with practitioners and through practitioner research. This non-identification with action research avoids the strictures of expectation that the action research label can sometimes conjure in respect of research methods and a formulaic approach to action-reflect cycles of inquiry. Also, action research as a field is still looked down on in some academic circles (Zeichner, 2009) and not being labelled as action research may ensure the acceptability of the research within the international academic domain. The association of this project with action research is my own, based on the broad principles of action research and on the framework and principles of The Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) with which the project is aligned.

The project is supported by TLRI, which is a government supported funding organisation whose purpose is to enhance the links between educational research and teaching practices to improve outcomes for learners. The principles for supporting particular research projects stress that research be undertaken as a partnership between researchers and practitioners (principle 4), and emphasise the central role of teachers and students in learning and the importance of the work being useful in practice (principle 5) (TLRI, 2010). These principles are consistent with the broad principles of action research that focus on learning and professional development of practitioners and research that feeds back into and effects change in practice (Noffke & Somekh, 2009; Somekh, 1995; Zeichner, 2009).

The partnership and support arrangements within the project include mentor clusters. Three groups were established, each comprising three participant researchers and one researcher who acted as a mentor. These groups provided opportunities for discussion around conceptualisations of knowledge and guidance in relation to individuals’ pedagogical initiatives and research foci. They also provided writing support for the production of case studies, which varied from editorial input by mentors to co-authorship. The mentor groups were established based on curriculum interests and existing relationships. The distinction between practitioner-researchers and researchers in these groups reflects the roles attributed to participants within the project, but it is a somewhat artificial distinction given that both practitioner-researchers and researchers are involved in teacher education, are colleagues in the same institution, and in one case shared the teaching of a course that was the context of one of the case studies in the project.

The project is ongoing, and at the time of writing this paper most of the case studies have been written in draft and the meta-analysis has been initiated. This meta-analysis, though, is in the early stages. Consequently, the discussion presented herein is necessarily selective, partial and tentative, suggestive of matters that may warrant further exploration. It is not the intention to present firm findings as much as it is to raise questions and cogitate on some matters that have presented themselves in the course of the research and which may inform thinking about this and other collaborative projects in teacher education.

IV. DISCUSSION

What, then, is some initial thinking about the opportunities and challenges the project presents in relation to reconceptualisations of knowledge, research partnerships and power relations? The following observations are based on researcher reflections and on initial reading of transcripts from interviews with one of the practitioner-researchers, Anne (pseudonym), drawing on selected literature to begin to try and make sense of practitioner-researchers' experiences in the project. It is a starting point for further analysis and discussion.

V. OPPORTUNITIES FOR KNOWLEDGE RECONCEPTUALISATION

All participant-researchers engaged with models and ideas relating to knowledge, teaching and learning in their curriculum and work contexts as part of the research project. Through whole group forums and the mentoring process, individuals were exposed to and chose to use different conceptual models or tools for engaging with ideas and exploring possibilities for practice in their work. The tools were used to enable educators to engage with complexity in debates relating to curriculum, teaching and learning in different curriculum contexts, to contemplate different perspectives, and to engage critically with the tools as instruments for exploring epistemological shifts in their own and others' thinking and practice. The tools included amongst others: a) a Multiple Meanings model, that presents distinct interpretations for meanings of the words 'global society', 'participate' and 'equip', based on modernist and discursive ways of thinking (Andreotti & Souza, 2008); b) a matrix of educational approaches, which combines different ideas relating to the nature of education and the nature of knowledge (Andreotti & Souza, 2008); c) post-modern perspectives of knowledge that describe epistemological shifts in terms of "cognitive adaptation" and "epistemological pluralism" (Andreotti, 2010); d) noun and verb constructions, whereby knowledge can be perceived as a noun (passive, accumulated and held by experts) or as a verb (socially constructed, active and changeable) (Gilbert, 2005); and e) personal models of epistemological development, including Magolda's (1992a, 1992b) four stages of epistemological thinking and understanding, Hofer's (2004) knowledge dimensions, and Moon's (2005) adaptation of Magolda's stages in relation to critical thinking.

Individual participant-researchers adopted different models and ways of conceptualising and analysing epistemological thinking in the context of their work and curriculum domain and in relation the pedagogical initiatives that they developed. In Anne's case, she adopted ideas relating to knowledge as a noun and a verb and Hofer's notion of personal epistemological dimensions to explore conceptualisations of knowledge in relation to the teaching and learning of English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL). This was done in the context of her advisory and professional learning work with ESOL teachers. The TLRI project afforded opportunities for participant-researchers to think differently about teaching, learning, curriculum, their roles and identities as teacher educators, and to enact new understandings through pedagogical initiatives and research relating to their own practice and work.

In relation to changes in her own personal thinking and practice, Anne attests to a shift in understanding of curriculum and what ESOL teaching and learning is about. She claims to having been "a bit more powerful in terms of advocating, you know, putting messages across nationally that are about knowledge [in ESOL] as a process rather than knowledge as a noun." She describes situations where she has advocated for learning in ESOL in ways that respond to individual students' language needs, develop English for a purpose and in the context of different learning areas, and utilise and value students' cultural

knowledge and thinking in their home language. This is in contrast to learning English in a lock step and non-contextualised manner that focuses on vocabulary lists and grammatical constructions.

Opportunities provided within the project to engage with models and different ways of conceptualising epistemological shifts gave Anne a language to converse about epistemological matters with her advisor colleagues and to explore new and different ideas with the secondary teachers with whom she worked.

A (Anne): ... but we had this kind of language to talk about it. You know, I mean the common ideas. And so, it's quite a good opportunity to sort of test out our thinking and talk through with these people [advisors' professional learning group].

....

And it's also partly to do with me understanding more about the theoretical underpinnings of different thoughts, and I'm sure now that I understand that those academics [who were advising on ESOL in the curriculum] were coming from a sort of post-structuralist notion of curriculum, and I didn't know where I was coming from! [laughs] ... and so it's been quite useful to have that, sort of a building up of some of those theoretical underpinnings. So I can understand it now, and therefore I can talk about it with more conviction.

For Anne, participation in the project supported and endorsed a desire she had to challenge the nature and content of professional learning programmes for secondary ESOL teachers. Anne described the project as having "kind of pushed me and enlarged my thinking rather than creating an enormous turnaround."

It is evident that participation in the project facilitated engagement of participant-researchers, of which Anne is one, with ideas relating to conceptualisations of knowledge and that this translated into changes in practice in the context of specific work and pedagogical initiatives. A deeper analysis is needed, though, of the nature of the "shifts" experienced by participant-researchers. The notion of a "shift" in thinking or practice is problematic, and is defined and limited by the theoretical frameworks that are used to identify shifts.

VI. COLLABORATION, PARTNERSHIP AND POWER

The collaborative and layered nature of the TLRI project has supported participant-researchers and researchers alike to engage with complex ideas relating to epistemological understandings and has developed research capacity through a mentoring process. Anne acknowledges the lead researcher as highly influential for her, by "taking us beyond superficial ideas, and kind of thinking quite deep about thoughts [about teaching and learning] and where they come from." She also values the writing support offered through the mentor group and describes the relationships therein as positive partnerships.

However, the multi-layered nature of the project is also a source of tension. This tension appears to derive from power relationships, knowledge hierarchies and institutional arrangements that sustain differences in roles and status between different participants in the research partnership. By way of background, it is important to note that the school advisory wing of teacher education and pre-service teacher education at the College of Education are separate units. They were historically organised that way and the distinction has been maintained through merger arrangements. Research was and is not an expected part of advisors' work, whereas it is an expected part of the work of those in initial teacher education, who are under pressure to achieve research active status for performance based research fund (PBRF) assessments. A division between continuing and initial teacher education is apparent in Anne's observations that she thought that by virtue of being at the same physical site, advisors (including herself) would have developed relationships with colleagues in pre-service education, but that apart from relationships developed with those in her mentor group in the TLRI project, she hasn't really developed relationships with anyone else in pre-service teacher education.

The TLRI project might be lauded for fostering partnerships and going some way towards bridging divisions between the sectors and the people involved in teacher education at the University of Canterbury. This is indeed a desirable effect of the project. However, a more critical analysis suggests that the notion of partnership is problematic within the study. This is not to imply that there are deep divisions in the TLRI project or that relationships between the individuals involved are not constructive, but to acknowledge the complexity of research partnerships and the power relationships that are inherent in research collaborations and to recognise tensions within teacher education that may transfer into a research context.

Within the TLRI project, power relations exist in the distinctions between researchers and participant-researchers, academics and advisors, and the different roles performed by these partners in the research. Anne recognises power relations in the research project and in initial teacher education when she says:

A: I've quite liked the relationship between the researchers and the participants. I was pretty wary at the beginning ... that we [advisors and practitioner-researchers] might be kind of used slightly, you know? We were the actors and they [researchers] were the directors, and ... they would be able to, and they still can, sort of pick up what we're doing and get PBRFs [research scores] ... while we're just the minions and doing. But actually, I've enjoyed the relationships, and so I don't feel that way now

....

There have been instances in the past where advisors have felt used by academics, and so ... I've got that caution in my mind ... But now that I'm becoming slightly, just ever so slightly involved in the academic world again, I don't feel so scared about it anymore.

She also expresses concern about how researchers might write the meta-analysis and how she and her work will be represented:

A: Because they're going to re-write it for this format and that format and present it ... [and so] do we lose something somewhere along the line in terms of ownership? So, there's this slight sense that that could happen. And also, once you've been lumped in with some other people, then you actually lose your individual thoughts anyway, because they become clusters of thoughts and that's not you anymore, it's a group instead. And so you can be manipulated in that way, I feel. So, that's still a concern, I suppose.

Anne is tapping into deep feelings relating to power, status and authority. She identifies as an advisor, with the "them" being colleagues in the "academic world." This is a world that until recently she appears not to have thought herself to be a part of. She is describing unequal relationships, with academics historically positioned as having greater power and authority and where collaborative research involving academics and advisors is for the greater benefit of academics and potentially to the cost of advisors. Whilst initial teacher educators (academics) and advisors may share a commitment to teacher education, their status in academia is not perceived as equal.

Underpinning these concerns is an implicit hierarchy of knowledge. In this hierarchy, academic and theoretical knowledge is attributed greater status than practice knowledge. Acknowledging that there is a hierarchy of knowledge, where theoretical and academic knowing is attributed greater value than practice and practitioner knowing, raises questions relating to collaborative research and research partnerships in teacher education. The idea of "partnership" is central to the research project, prefigured in the requirements of TLRI and recognised in the structural and mentoring arrangements of the project. It is a word that sounds good, and provides a rationale for the obtaining and granting of research funding. However, it is a term that if used uncritically can present an assumption of equality, mask power differentials and render silent tensions that exist within research projects (Quinlivan, Boyask, & Carswell, 2008).

Quinlivan et al (2008) observe that in research partnerships between universities and schools the “rhetoric surrounding such partnerships suggests their value lies in mutual benefit for all parties concerned” but that “attempts of both teachers and researchers to address issues of social inequalities are complicated by their location within economies of knowledge” (p. 6-7). Action research in its many forms may also embody power relationships and knowledge economies. Zeichner (2009) recognises this in his resistance to categorising his own approach according to technical, practical, critical and emancipatory labels, stating that he thinks that such a classification “creates a hierarchy that devalues practitioners” (p. 69) and, by implication, elevates the work and perspectives of theorists and academics above those of practitioners (teachers).

Initial reflection on the experiences of participant researchers in the TLRI project suggests that unequal relationships do not just exist between universities and schools, but also within universities and in the provision of teacher education. These inequities are pervasive. Power relationships are thus also implicit in action research pertaining to teacher education and in research that involves participants from different sectors of teacher education. This initial analysis and discussion suggests that the idea of partnerships and the potency of power relations in teacher education research warrant further exploration.

VII. FINAL WORD

The research that is described in this paper has afforded opportunities for reconceptualisations of knowledge relating to curriculum, teaching and learning within teacher education. This has been facilitated by research partnerships. Different levels of research knowledge and experience mean that the researchers may serve important roles as guides for practitioners engaged in action research, with different levels of input and direction depending on individuals’ backgrounds and research experience (Somekh, 1995). The role of researchers as critical friends is important if a project is to avoid being ingrown or content-less (Somekh, 1995), to maintain the ideological and methodological integrity research projects and to establish confidence in the quality of practitioner research (Zeichner, 2009). There is, though, a challenge for those engaged in action research that involves teacher educators to recognise power relations and knowledge hierarchies within teacher education and to attend to these. This means that academics and researchers need to turn a critical eye on themselves and consider how they may consciously and unconsciously sustain power relationships through research partnerships in teacher education.

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