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Futuring Sustainable Australian Teacher Education through Recent Doctoral Dissertations: A Thematic Analysis of Alternative Scenarios

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Abstract

Envisioning and enacting teacher education for sustainable futures require simultaneous attention to multiple influences and imperatives. One among several possible approaches to this task is to draw on alternative scenarios as recommended by futures researchers, thereby suggesting several different possible visions of teacher education and considering their likely impact on current policy-making and practice. This paper deploys scenarios of potential higher education futures in the United Kingdom (Blass, Jasman, & Shelley, 2010, in press) as a framework for addressing this research question: Which challenges and opportunities might shape the sustainability of Australian teacher education?

In particular, the framework is employed to examine six recent doctoral dissertations supervised by the authors and dealing explicitly or implicitly with teacher education research issues, ranging from visual literacy and visual signifiers to students with learning difficulties and teaching for social justice. A thematic analysis elicits several opportunities and challenges attending the sustainability options for Australian teacher education generated by Blass et al.'s (2010, in press) scenarios.

The paper presents the thematic analysis findings by clustering the opportunities and challenges around three key elements of contemporary theorising of sustainability: contexts, connections and capabilities (Holland, 2008; Lanzi, 2007). These elements are posited as robust conceptual resources for highlighting and interrogating sustainability options across multiple domains of educational experience and activity. They are also proposed as vital ingredients in the ongoing re-evaluation of Australian teacher education designed to ensure its sustainable futures and to maximise its effectiveness and relevance.

Introduction

Teacher education can be seen as an accurate barometer of wider developments in higher education in Australia and internationally. Like higher education, teacher education has been subject to national inquiries (the most recent in Australia being respectively the Bradley Review (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008) and *Top of the Class* (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007)). Also like higher education, teacher education is the object of concern about its future sustainability, given current pressures related to cost, quality and relevance (Cochran-Smith, Feiman-Nemser, McIntyre, & Demers, 2008).

This paper uses alternative higher education futures in the United Kingdom (Blass et al., 2010, in press) to analyse six recent doctoral dissertations related to teacher education research issues. The analysis enables the authors to answer this research question: Which challenges and opportunities might shape the sustainability of Australian teacher education?

The paper consists of three sections:

- A selective literature review, conceptual framework and research design
- A thematic analysis of the chosen dissertations
- Concluding implications of the analysis for futuring sustainable Australian teacher education.

Literature Review, Conceptual Framework and Research Design

Commensurate with the educators it helps to prepare and certify, teacher education is under increasing pressure to demonstrate its relevance and cost effectiveness. While observing “the view that teaching requires little formal study and ... frequent disdain for teacher education programs” (p. 300), Darling-Hammond (2006) argued that faculties of education “should resist pressures to water down preparation” (p. 300). Likewise Grimmett, Fleming and Trotter (2009) referred to “the macro-political context that constrains the work of teacher educators struggling for legitimacy and identity within both the university and the professional field of teaching” (p. 5). Similarly Grossman and McDonald (2008) urged teacher educators to reconnect their research with teaching and organisations and policy implementation in order “to address the complexity of both teaching as a practice and the preparation of teachers” (p. 184).

Demands being placed on teacher education are equally complex and diverse, and have significant implications for its capacity to survive and sustain itself. These demands range from being part of reforms to education systems in developed and developing nations (Peck, Gallucci, Sloan, & Lippincott, 2009) to becoming entwined in the neoliberal agenda (Sleeter, 2008) to responding for calls for improvements to the quality of teachers (Townsend & Bates, 2007) to producing teachers who will boost standardised test scores for their students (Carroll, Featherstone, Featherstone, Feiman-Nemser, & Roosevelt, 2007). Yet teacher educators must engage ethically and strategically with these and other demands, as well as enacting their own initiatives, if teacher education is to have a future that they and their constituencies regard as viable and valuable.

More specifically, the Australian teacher education literature has elicited several challenges that teacher educators are required to meet if their programs are to be effective and useful and if their contributions are to be regarded by pre- and in-service teachers, government policy-makers and multiple ‘significant others’ as futures-focused and sustainable in the medium and long term. One such challenge relates to extending and advocating for teacher education as a field of research (Brennan, 2009; Reid & Le Cornu, 2009). Another challenge is concerned with identity (re)formations on the part of student teachers (Pietsch, 2009; Porteus, 2009) and beginning teachers (hunter, 2009; MacGregor, 2009). Yet another challenge refers to responding – and helping teachers and others to respond – to external developments that have a profound impact on teacher education and teaching, such as curriculum changes (Langat, 2009), senior secondary schooling developments (Cui, 2009) and national graduate teacher standards (Walkington, 2009). These and other associated features of the contemporary teacher education domain constitute both opportunities and risks for teacher educators in ensuring that what they do is productive, relevant and sustainable, as exemplified in the discussion below of contexts, connections and capabilities in the selected doctoral dissertations.

One way to frame teacher educators’ engagement with these growing demands on and expectations of their field is to draw on the approaches and associated insights developed by futures researchers. In particular, the paper takes up the idea of elaborating a number of highly differentiated scenarios for considering possible future policy options as outlined by Blass et al. (2010, in press). While their focus was on the higher education sector in the United Kingdom, we see utility in applying a similar strategy to considering possibilities for Australian teacher education. This is partly because of several resonances between the two sectors, such as the clustering and ranking of individual institutions (Oxford and Cambridge versus the much newer ‘redbrick’ universities in the United Kingdom; the ‘Group of Eight’ versus regional universities in Australia), the explicit focus on student retention and attrition and the widening participation agenda in both countries and the growing emphasis on the scholarship of teaching and learning through the British Higher Education Academy and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

Blass et al. (2010, in press) outlined the following five scenarios:

1. Leading knowledge creation

The HE [higher education] is concerned with leading innovation and contributing to policy, offering high level conceptual development in an increasingly specialised manner. The job of building a critical mass of knowledge workers has transferred to the FE [further education] sector and the undergraduate provision of the HE sector is concerned with developing its own future workforce. (p. 4)

2. Responsive knowledge creation

The redbrick and post-[19]92 universities are securely funded by corporate collaborations and government funding for teaching. They offer a variety of study options which means that more students can be accommodated within smaller building space, as blended learning and block delivery become the norm and many courses are delivered in off-site hubs, such as corporate premises, local schools in the evenings and hotel conference facilities. The majority of students are part-time which allows for facilities to be used all year round and provides flexibility in the semesterisation process. (p. 5)

3. Regional conglomerates

The purpose of the conglomerate is educationally driven for sustainable society and the contribution to the region, democracy, individual communities and the environment is greater than is currently the case. Funding is distributed through a regional core fund and then additional funding according to the need of the region. Efficiencies are achieved through regionalising services and quality functions and partnership working to the point that the conglomerate becomes embedded in the region and it is the obvious point of call for industry, the public sector and community groups, whatever their knowledge, education or research needs. (p. 6)

4. No government funding

Being an academic is much like any other highly skilled job, in that it is high stress, highly competitive and your job is only as secure as your last semester's teaching, research or income generation. Everyone has to generate enough income to secure their salary and pay is individually negotiated within a bonus culture. (p. 6)

5. Total government funding

There are long term career structures for those who prefer teaching, research, professional or management roles. The expansion of the sector has opened a multitude of opportunities with regard to [the] development of lifelong learning and wider curriculum activities. There is increased partnership working with schools, colleges, community groups and industry, which in turn are developing new career path opportunities in parallel with the more traditional academic route. (p. 7)

Clearly these scenarios are highly diverse and richly imagined. They also have several resonances with Australian teacher education, offering possible options of varied attractiveness. In particular, we contend that, if teacher educators desire to create more positive and sustainable futures for themselves and their constituencies, they need to engage with contemporary notions of sustainability, which constitute reliable compass bearings as teacher educators steer pathways through increasingly squally waters.

To demonstrate this argument, we present in the next section a thematic analysis of six doctoral dissertations that articulate with current teacher education issues. The dissertations were supervised by one or more of us, and were chosen on the basis of linking with one or more of the aforementioned concepts of sustainability, and thereby of providing a foundation for addressing the research question posed earlier. This approach was simultaneously inductive and deductive and built on the rigour associated with thematic analysis undertaken in this way (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Thematic Analysis

The doctoral dissertations selected for analysis were as follows:

- Links between visual literacy and post-Literacy (Walker-Gibbs, 2003)
- Primary school teachers' encounters with a visual literacy initiative (McDougall, 2004)
- Parents' constructions of their children's learning difficulties (Arizmendi, 2005)
- Manifestations of workplace bullying in early childhood education and care contexts (Noble, 2008)
- The work and identities of mental health nurses (Hurley, 2009)
- Using children's literature to enhance the teaching of social justice (Hawkins, 2010).

These dissertations traverse diverse terrains, with some more obviously connected with teacher education and its future sustainability than others. Yet each of them contributes to portraying the broader tapestry with which teacher education must engage, and each affords particular insights into possible scenarios for teacher education of the kind sketched by Blass et al. (2010, in press).

The framework for the thematic analysis was taken from three key concepts of sustainability: contexts, connections and capabilities (Holland, 2008; Lanzi, 2007). For Lanzi (2007), recent developments in the capabilities approach to maximising educational outcomes have emphasised an attentiveness to growing human capital, which in turn is posited on understanding the diverse (and diversely positioned) contexts in which education is enacted and the connections that can help that enactment to be beneficial and even transformative across multiple contexts. Similarly, while Holland's (2008) account of capabilities focused on environmental justice and climate change, its relevance to us lies in drawing attention to the multiple responsibilities and roles of learners, educators, policy-makers, community members and other stakeholders in ensuring that learning and teaching contribute directly to building the capacities of individuals and groups and thereby to enhancing national and global competencies and the power to act in and on environments ethically and responsibly. In combination, these ideas highlight the local enactment of broader forces, the interdependence of networks and the development of work- and life-related skills for personal and communal empowerment. We turn now to discuss the themes as exhibited by one or more of the dissertations.

Contexts

Local, regional, national and international contexts were evident in all six dissertations, including a single primary school (Arizmendi, 2005), two preschool centres (Hawkins, 2010), 11 government schools (McDougall, 2004), and hospitals and other health settings in England and Scotland (Hurley, 2009). These contexts emerged as important in all six studies and as crucial in some of them. For example, Noble (2008) found that "ECEC [early childhood education and care] practitioners do not uniformly experience workplace bullying but that patterns exist according to different ECEC contexts that characterise early childhood service provision" (p. 8). Arizmendi (2005) elaborated the notion of "*The contextual child*", whereby "each child as a thinking entity is a product of the *context* in which s/he is defined (or created, constructed and re-constructed)"; moreover, "because contexts are temporary, so too should be the labels that are employed within them" (p. 344). For Walker-Gibbs (2003),

The move to post-Literate understandings is linked to a reconceptualising of generation, culture, knowledge and power within formal educational contexts. The major finding of this thesis leads to a more complex understanding of visual literacy within and outside formal educational contexts. (p. iii)

Thus contexts powerfully frame the specific conditions and material realities for the doctoral graduates' respective studies, as well as for efforts to develop sustainable Australian teacher education futures. This suggests a complex interplay, if not a potential power play, between nationally developed teacher education policies and locally enacted provision of those policies at

institutional and campus levels. For instance, if they are not recognised and valued, such contexts are likely to prove counterproductive to the attainment of nationally and internationally generated benchmarks and standards.

Connections

Multiple forms of connections were also mapped in all six dissertations. McDougall (2004) articulated a complex web of associations among the teachers who participated in her study, their discourses about their classroom practices, their personal identities, curriculum reform and changing communication practices. Hurley (2009) interpreted evidence of feelings of “low power and worth” by some mental health nurses in terms of “a connection among power, care delivery and emotional intelligence” (p. 209). Hawkins (2010) found confirmation of simultaneous positive moves towards social justice understandings by the participating preschoolers and their teachers (as co-researchers with her) in the emergence of new relationships:

As a result the co-researchers grew to know, respect, empathise with and understand one another on a very deep level. This could also be said for the way the co-researchers viewed the preschoolers and how the preschoolers began to view one another and the characters in the texts. They developed an emotional connection with characters who were being treated unjustly and unfairly. They also developed an emotional connection with characters who were different from themselves. (p. 340)

Despite their variety, all these connections provided vital support and encouragement in the authors’ respective studies, thereby harnessing energy and enhancing resilience and success. The issues canvassed in those studies, ranging from workplace bullying and teaching for social justice to understanding learning difficulties and visual literacy to envisioning emotional intelligence and post-Literacy, are directly relevant to the concerns of teacher educators, who in turn need to comprehend the complex networks and relationships underpinning those issues. Teacher educators also belong to, and depend on, multiple connections of knowledge and power that help to bind them to one another and their various constituencies and to sustain them in hopefully productive dialogue with one another.

Capabilities

Capabilities were represented in the dissertation as diverse capacities enacted across a range of contexts and involving numerous connections. Walker-Gibbs (2003) conceptualised visual literacy and post-Literacy as generationally specific practices demonstrating particular kinds of power in specific networks and associations. Noble (2008) defined work stress “as the harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources or needs of the individual” and as resulting “from the interaction of the worker and the conditions of work”, a disjuncture that can give rise to workplace bullying. McDougall (2004) elaborated a different type of disjuncture, in which:

... teachers find it hard to take new approaches to teaching on board if such change challenges fundamental values. Regardless of their capabilities, or what the curriculum says, teachers will often be guided by their deeply entrenched, pedagogical beliefs or mindsets. (p. 190)

This suggests that the development of capabilities is far from straightforward, but instead derives from complex contexts and connections. Similarly it is important not to oversimplify teacher education’s responsibility for helping to facilitate particular capabilities in teacher graduates, especially as demands to do so are likely to increase as more and more is expected of teachers and teacher educators. To be sustainable, capabilities need to be framed by understandings that are locally specific as well as more broadly engaged.

Conclusion

Blass et al. (2010, in press) provided us with five different scenarios of possible futures for higher education in the United Kingdom. The six doctoral dissertations analysed above elicited diverse forms of contexts, connections and capabilities that constituted alternative scenarios for the future of Australian teacher education. In considering the implications of those scenarios for this discussion, we return to our research question: Which challenges and opportunities might shape the sustainability of Australian teacher education?

The challenges identified in the dissertations included hostile work environments, change fatigue, alienating policies, inequitable practices and deeply entrenched prejudices. The opportunities entailed forming alliances, devising innovative and transformative actions and reimagining particular concepts. These challenges and opportunities also resonate strongly with the pressures on teacher educators outlined earlier in the paper. Indeed, to be sustainable, Australian teacher education needs to be cognisant of these and other challenges and to create opportunities for disrupting unproductive and unethical customs and devising new approaches. Doing so is critical not only to futuring sustainable Australian teacher education but also to serving its diverse constituencies.

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