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Hope, engaged pedagogy, and educating teachers as transformative intellectuals

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HOPE, ENGAGED PEDAGOGY, AND EDUCATING TEACHERS AS TRANSFORMATIVE INTELLECTUALS

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Keywords

Engaged pedagogy; teacher education; critical pedagogy; Aotearoa New Zealand; hope

Abstract

In this commentary article, the authors discuss the significance of conceptualising teacher education as critical, intellectual work both for student teachers and the educators who support their professional learning. As former classroom teachers and current researchers and teacher educators, the authors position the current socio-political landscape in Aotearoa New Zealand as concerning for the field of education, but also recognise that in moments of upheaval there are opportunities for hope and change. Rather than allowing shrinking resources to narrow our scope, we believe it is a significant moment to assert a belief that all students in Aotearoa deserve to be taught by engaged, transformative educators.

Introduction

As former classroom teachers, parents, teacher educators, and education researchers in a university setting, we think about teaching a lot.

We often think about teaching in our specific context and recognise our thinking as informed by our backgrounds and experiences. Jessica is senior lecturer in education and was a secondary teacher for 10 years before shifting into tertiary teaching and research. She is a cisgender White woman of European heritage and moved from the United States to Aotearoa New Zealand after earning her doctorate. Katie is of Māori, Tongan, and Pākehā heritage and was a teacher in a primary school where she also was a leader for Māori achievement and the school Pasifika group before moving into tertiary teaching. She is currently a teaching fellow and PhD student at the University of Waikato, studying the impacts of education on Māori and Pacific cultural identities.

In our current roles, we support teacher candidates in various preparation programmes, and teachers who have returned to university to pursue additional learning or a postgraduate degree. In order to do this well, we also imagine the many dimensions of possibility for the places and spaces where those teachers will work, the communities they will become part of, the homes where their names will stay afloat in conversation for (at least) a year. The broad and beautiful possibilities for how teaching might unfold towards any number of unpredictable futures is not a predetermined set of scenes that people can learn their lines for. Simply put, there is no way to “train” a teacher. That has never been what we set out to do, and is not what education is about.

Spending days, weeks, a year with a group of young people is a tremendous responsibility and a tremendous privilege. The lessons we learn as we connect with learners from many walks of life in our classrooms are *taonga* (treasures). The word *ako* in te reo Māori simultaneously reflects both learning and teaching, and the dual nature of this experience is evident when reciprocal learning between teacher and student takes place. This is part of the philosophy we engage through our work with teachers at different phases of their careers, though in this piece we are thinking mainly about teachers who are entering the field as they finish a teacher education programme. As teacher educators in a university setting, we are honoured to spend our time with others who are committed to the often-invisibilised

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intellectual work of teaching in addition to the many visible activities that the non-teaching public may mistake for the entirety of the job. The term “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975) was coined to represent what people learn about being teachers from their time spent as students, viewing their own teachers “front stage and centre, like an audience viewing a play” (p. 62). We would argue that this perspective is not only significant for future teachers; we would have all logged thousands of hours of seeing teachers “at work” by the time we leave school. So, surely, anyone who has been a student in school must know what the job entails, right? Of course not. It would be ludicrous to apply this logic to other professions (as though everyone who has been to a restaurant understands what it means to be a chef, for example), and yet the underestimation of the work of teachers, in quantity (Varkey, 2020) and quality (Dolton et al., 2018), is globally pervasive.

We know that teaching occupies our hearts and minds well beyond the hours we spend in a classroom. However, we purposefully push back on discourses that position teaching as a “talent,” a “calling”, or a “labour of love” (Gray, 2022). For many teachers, those aspects of the craft may be part of their experiences or identities; however, positioning the profession as anything other than that—a profession—undermines our collective claim to this truth: teaching is difficult and intellectual work that deserves to be compensated fairly and regarded highly in our communities locally, nationally, and internationally. We also push back on the “cultural myth” (Britzman, 1986, 2003) that teachers are “self-made”. Intended to explain away the complexity of how teachers come to be, the construct of the “natural teacher” presents a figure who “somehow possesses talent, intuition, and common sense” and “diminishes reflection on how we come to know” about the practice of pedagogy (Britzman, 2003, p. 230). The nature of teaching and learning to teach are complex endeavours that we, the authors, continue to explore in our own learning, our discussions, and our current and prior research (e.g., Land & Rubin, 2020; Rubin, 2018; Rubin et al., 2021). We began our own careers without ever expecting teaching to be a simple task. We love the complexities of teaching and appreciate the role research plays in illuminating them.

Teacher training and education in Aotearoa New Zealand

We, the authors, completed our own teacher education in universities (here and abroad), and have spent a lot of time in universities since then. For us, teacher education has always been interwoven with university learning, research, and deep thinking, and we are eager to continue and expand on those approaches with the (beginning and experienced) teachers in our classes. But the association between universities and teacher preparation is a fairly recent connection in the context of Aotearoa. In her article about the contemporary history of teacher education in New Zealand, Alcorn (2014) described how changes in policy, governing, and public opinion around teaching and teacher education move swiftly due to the relatively small size of the country and thus a “vulnerability to exigencies of supply and demand” (p. 448). Until 1974, teacher education in New Zealand took place at eight teachers’ colleges where staff were successful teachers, and most funding and major decisions were made by a single centralised Department of Education (no longer in existence). As part of a neoliberal approach to governance, the Treasury (in 1987) “challenged the concept of education as a public good and recommended choice, competition, and ‘user pays’” (Alcorn, 2014, p. 449); this was a reason to cut government funding, which then contributed to changes in the sector and the ignition of debates that continue still. Alcorn, writing in 2014, noted that at that time, most teacher education was taking place in universities, which had incorporated the dedicated teachers’ colleges. As university academics, teacher educators were then expected to complete doctorates and produce research to be eligible to compete for performance-based funding alongside lecturers in other fields of study. While this was a controversial shift at the time, and the execution has been imperfect, this move made space for some important changes. With the right support, a clear vision, and the purposeful nurturing of research culture in university-based teacher education, we believe Aotearoa could be at the forefront of changing the world of, and through, teacher education.

And yet, we are writing from Aotearoa New Zealand at a time when the country is experiencing a shortage of teachers (Gerritsen, 2023a; McCulloch, 2023) and a crescendo of discord in the sector

(PPTA, 2023; Quinlivan, 2023). We are also seeing multiple crises in tertiary education (Chaudhuri, 2023; Gaston, 2023; Mitchell, 2023), with university leadership slashing departments and programmes as short-term solutions to balance their books in the face of a market-oriented and often inadequate central funding model (Gerritsen, 2023c; Ross, 2023). As university-based teacher educators, it is clear to us these problems (in NZ and elsewhere) are not separate squalls but rather parts of the same gathering storm (Ortolan, 2022), and we worry that making short-sighted decisions for hollow successes today might be sacrificing the potential of the future. We are wary that the increased demand for primary and secondary teachers might collide with tertiary institutions' competition for enrolments to maintain the funding needed to operate (much of which is allocated, with dystopian precision, by fractions of a student) (Gerritsen, 2023b; Gerritsen & Bhamidipati, 2023; O'Dwyer, 2022). We worry this could lead, as it has in other countries (Ingersoll, 2001; VOA, 2022), to a weakening of entry standards (Côté & Allahar, 2011), pressure to pass through under-performing student teachers, and a sector willing to employ teachers who have received minimum "training", a major issue since teacher quality is both impacted by preparation (Liston et al., 2008) and closely linked with student outcomes (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2000). Simply increasing "supply" is not a solution to the problems at hand (Darling-Hammond & Podolsky, 2019; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Tran & Smith, 2022; Welles, 2022). It is best for students to be taught mainly by teachers who have been engaged in an education suited to the complexity of the job (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Santiago, 2002) and our unique context (Boyask, 2018). We are hopeful that this moment of upheaval might become an opportunity for reflection, discussion, and, ultimately, strengthening the profession (Espinoza et al., 2018) and improving schools.

Debates and tensions about teacher education are longstanding and far-reaching. Writing almost a century ago, George S. Counts (1935) criticised the "teacher training lockstep" by which teachers (in the US specifically, but not exclusively) received preparation that was two-dimensional and vocational, emphasising practicality rather than an expansive and potentially transformative education. In her seminal text about learning to teach, Professor Deborah Britzman (2003) connected Counts' essay and the persistent problem of top-down monological teacher training with social control as a broader project. Britzman (2003) called "teacher training" a euphemism for a demand for conformity, which she associated with restricting possibilities for what and who teachers could be and privileging "routinised behaviour over critical action" (p. 46). Conceptualising teacher preparation as training rather than education perpetuates the "neophyte [teacher] as an empty receptacle" (Britzman, 2003, p. 46). We don't see our students, future teachers, as empty receptacles, and we don't want them to see their own students that way either. We want to work alongside teachers who see themselves as joining a profession of "transformative intellectuals" (Giroux, 1985) and who see education as a practice of, and for, freedom.

Embracing (teacher) education as a project of freedom (hooks, 1994) means being steadily critical of the internalised hierarchies and conceptions of authority and knowing we bring with us. In our field, that means not only making space for new voices, but valuing new perspectives in our field and acknowledging the potential of beginning teachers and their contributions. Conceptualising teacher preparation as "training" encourages us to maintain a relentlessly top-down perspective that necessarily narrows our view and demands binary (this-or-that) thinking. But acknowledging our profession as one that is dynamic and complex enough to sustain many views at the same time helps all of us to keep growing.

As we continue, we offer some thinking about the significance of teachers embracing our collective identity as professionals and participants in the public discourse, and the significance of continuing to learn far beyond any formal education. To support this discussion, we engage with Henry Giroux's foundational theorising about teachers as transformative intellectuals and bell hooks' philosophy of teaching as a practice of freedom. Then, we discuss the significance of appreciating new voices and new perspectives in our profession, like those of the new teachers whose work is included in this special issue.

Teaching as critical, intellectual, hopeful work

There is a tension that remains unresolved, often within a single department or school, between the role of teacher preparation as a mechanism for training teachers to enact routines versus a chance to educate teachers to think critically and teach dialogically. In his work, North American philosopher Henry Giroux identified and problematised some of the presumptions about the nature of teachers' work that lay beneath the concept of teacher training, and the expansive possibilities for learners whose teachers see their roles differently. Whereas an emphasis on training perpetuates the view that teachers are mainly “technicians” who enact already-existing curriculum, we see the work of teachers as necessarily more complex. As teacher educators, we are preparing professionals who we hope will be transformative intellectuals—teachers who design curriculum and select resources that “prepare learners to be active and *critical* citizens” (Giroux, 1985, p. 376, emphasis added).

The critical aspect of this is significant. A deceptively simple concept that is challenging for some of our students (as students themselves, and as teachers) to embrace is that there is no such thing as a neutral education (Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994). This refusal to believe in the possibility of neutrality when in a position of authority is a foundational aspect of critical pedagogy (McLaren, 2002), a practice that moves us away from “transmission” models of teaching in which the teacher has the knowledge and is mostly in the business of delivering it to students. A critical pedagogical practice (Freire, 1996; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2002) turns our priorities towards engaging in responsive and intellectually challenging dialogue, letting all classrooms be places where the status quo is questioned in light of new understandings.

With a critical pedagogical practice, a “teacher’s task is not to mould students but to encourage human agency” (Giroux, 2013, p. 174). The refusal to maintain a veneer of neutrality stems from accepting that teaching is always political, in a broad, nonpartisan sense (Earl & Swanson, 2017). The pedagogical choices educators make either serve to maintain the status quo or, to varying degrees, disrupt it. Any calls for teachers to be neutral, then, are actually veiled demands for them to take a political stance, and usually quite a conservative one.

However, while we characterise “training” as a word that gets incorrectly presented as neutral when it comes to teacher preparation, “critical” might incorrectly get positioned as negative or controversial. Criticality is certainly not controversial: critical thinking, critical pedagogy, and critical literacy are at the heart of the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007), understandings of local control by elected boards, *Tātaiako* (MoE, 2011), *Tapasā* (MoE, 2018), and the new Aotearoa New Zealand Histories curriculum (MoE, 2022). Through a lens of criticality, Aotearoa New Zealand is a particularly rich and interesting context for developing a teaching practice. Our unique foundations in, and continuing aspirations towards, biculturalism invite longer views of history and informed discussions about power, and might facilitate a true reckoning with the impacts of colonisation. In other words, all teachers in Aotearoa should be critical thinkers, and recent education policy supports moving in this direction. Rather than leave criticality out of our classroom discussions, we must ensure its ubiquity in curriculum policy does not make it invisible in our actual conversations about the nature of teaching and being a teacher.

In addition to being clearly not controversial, due at least in part to its support by New Zealand education policy, we also argue that criticality is far from negative. Being critical is interwoven with hopefulness, perhaps part of how Grace (1994) described “complex hope”: “an optimism of the will that recognises the historical and structural difficulties which need to be overcome” (p. 59). Similarly, historian Rebecca Solnit (2010) reminds us that authentic hope “requires clarity – seeing the troubles in the world – and imagination, seeing what might lie beyond these situations that are perhaps not inevitable and immutable” (p. 20). Hope is complicated; for an intelligent group of people (like teachers) a sustainable sense of hope requires more than platitudes or quotes on fridge magnets. A professional education that supports teachers to grapple with complexity is as necessary for fostering a sense of hopefulness as it is for criticality.

Engaged pedagogy as political and personal

The position of authority that teachers occupy, and the ways we may have seen other teachers in our own schooling histories use that authority, can make it difficult to challenge patterns of knowledge transmission and top-down pedagogies. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) envisioned “engaged pedagogy” as a critical approach to teaching that encourages teachers to bring our whole selves to our practice, and, likewise, recognise our students as complex human beings rather than waiting receptacles in which to deposit isolated pieces of knowledge. Engaged pedagogy recognises that, beyond being non-neutral, teaching is personal and relational; the purpose of education and being an educator is not just about sharing information, but about sharing in the growth of our students (hooks, 1994). The relationships that foster and are fostered by these intellectual engagements must grow from true connection, and the transgression of the boundaries that separate humans into categories and hierarchies. Transgressing these boundaries requires re-thinking and relinquishing some of the authority and privilege we might have inherited, in exchange for practising a pedagogy that “respects and cares for the souls of our students” (hooks, 1994, p. 13).

Writing about her work in tertiary education, hooks (1994) also connected criticality and engagement with a sense of excitement, which “in higher education, was viewed as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process” (p. 7). However, the excitement hooks references cannot simply be excitement about the ideas or topics of study, but is also a reflection of a class’s genuine interest in one another. In a traditional teacher-centred classroom, students might be encouraged or required to mostly focus on the presence of their lecturer; the other students become (at best) incidental or (at worst) threatening. In order for a classroom to be a place of excitement, hooks (1994) asserted that the educator must insist upon and demonstrate genuine value for everyone’s presence.

In Aotearoa New Zealand specifically, we see spaces of harmony between engaged pedagogy as hooks defined it and what Professor Berryman and her colleagues (2018) called cultural relationships for responsive pedagogy. In a recent piece (Berryman et al., 2023), the authors discuss tools and processes to deepen teachers’ understandings of the necessity for “both cultural relationships and responsive pedagogy to influence effective change for Māori learners” (p. 15). Such praxis speaks back to deeply entrenched deficit theorising and negative discourses surrounding Māori students. Throughout this country’s history an array of racist education policies have been implemented. This included a “two-tiered” system aimed towards pushing Māori out of intellectual spaces and more towards careers involving manual or agricultural labour (Macfarlane, 2015). Remnants of this type of deficit thinking are noticeable in some of the discourses that still circulate in Aotearoa, evident through the experiences of students whose voices are highlighted in Bishop and Berryman’s (2013) text *Culture Speaks: Cultural Relationships and Classroom Learning*.

Students from elsewhere in the Pacific also experience pervasive negative discourses, as well as a persistent focus on what it is they can’t do (Fa’avae, 2016). Reynolds (2022) stated that in Aotearoa New Zealand, “mainstream thought on Pacific education tends to highlight the relatively poor educational achievement and sub-optimal experiences of Pacific learners” (p.6). Naepi (2021) highlighted the way that the undervaluing of Māori and Pacific ways of knowing persists into higher education, meaning these inequities may continue without reflection and action. Conscientization (Freire, 1996), meaning growing, strengthening, and changing individual consciousness, is a necessary step in ensuring that teachers examine what we may be doing that contributes to the unjust status quo, thus interrupting the inherited discourses and creating opportunities for all of our students to flourish.

The hope of fresh perspectives and new voices

Apart from this commentary, all the articles in this special issue of *Teachers and Curriculum*, “Ngā Timatanga Hou: Fresh Perspectives on Education” were written by new teachers who recently finished their preparation programme. We have been so inspired while learning alongside them to produce this

collection, an experience that has energised our thinking about what it means to be a teacher, now, in Aotearoa New Zealand. In addition to learning so much about the varied and significant topics the contributors chose to research, this activity has spurred ongoing conversations about how we might best support future teachers to see themselves as transformative intellectuals who will continue to learn and engage with the world around them to co-construct meaningful learning experiences with their students, and to produce worthwhile research to inform thinking and practice close to home and for an international audience.

The contributors to this special issue, at the start of this phase in their professional careers, are asking questions not only informed by their new roles in the classroom, but also by their positions as learners in and beyond schools, as student teachers, as children and parents in communities, as people with diverse backgrounds and approaches. They are wondering about topics that matter to them in ways that encompass all those facets of who they are. By starting the academic writing component of their careers through principled and systematic study of scholarly literature, as many of these articles do, the authors are both looking back and gesturing forward. They are honouring the thinkers who have paved the way for them while constructing a deeply informed lens through which to view their teaching lives, and perhaps, one day, longer and more involved research studies with data they produce.

The essays that hooks (1994) wrote about teaching were intended to be celebratory, to be a “hopeful and exuberant” attempt to “convey the pleasure and joy” (p. 10) that are part of teaching. The experience of working alongside former students who are beginning teachers emphasised this for us: engaged pedagogy, informed by excitement and joy, does not only empower students. It empowers teachers as well, though it demands our full engagement and genuine willingness to learn. Producing this special issue alongside former students was about sharing in this joy alongside one another even more than it was about leading a team towards an achievement. The excitement and joy of building something together, as a community that transgresses inherited boundaries and hierarchies, is something that we will carry forward from this experience.

As teacher educators in Aotearoa, we must be mindful of where we stand, of who we are, and who we are with. Learning alongside teachers who are new to the profession has helped to energise and illuminate the significance of these intertwined priorities—criticality and hope—in the current state of the profession and the future that calls us forward. These notions inform our own expressions of an engaged critical pedagogy in our teaching, which, if we truly subscribe to it, implies we must be ready to listen to, and learn from, the voices of early career teachers.

Conclusion

Earlier in this piece, we wondered whether current developments in the field of teaching might offer an opportunity to think critically about the state of education, and teacher education, in Aotearoa New Zealand. Of course, we recognise that acting as though teachers, students, or schools are part of a monolithic culture contributes to a problematic discourse “that is at once authoritative and impossible” (Britzman, 2003, p. 71). The many dimensions of diversity that our schools contain and comprise is not explored here, though it is elsewhere (e.g., lisahunter et al., 2015; Qi et al., 2023; Anderson et al., 2023). However, while accepting the risks of generalising, we wonder if teaching and teacher education are positioned and discussed in ways that invite current and potential members of the profession to see themselves and their colleagues as transformative intellectuals.

We hope to see more discussion that welcomes the complexity and significance of teaching towards a more just and equitable world. We hope a re-orientation towards critical reflection and honouring the spaces teachers and learners occupy together might feed the possibility of its own becoming, inviting more aspiring teachers who are eager to take on this work for the sake of our collective future. Drawing from the essence of Freire’s pedagogy of hope (Freire et al, 2021), we are excited about students like the authors in this journal. Their passion and drive in relation to creating critically-informed and inclusive learning environments offers hope that their roles as transformative intellectuals will contribute to the necessary erosion of walls (like inherited power structures or deficit positioning of

certain groups). In other words, while we must use pedagogy as a tool to transgress hierarchies and boundaries for now, we also must aim towards breaking them down entirely.

While the expressions of a critical practice will look different in spaces across childhood and adult education, to us, the heart of critical pedagogy remains steady. Critical pedagogy is a form of “educated hope” (Giroux, 2019) which commits us to supporting young people to expand and deepen their sense of themselves while also thinking critically about the world. In doing so, we hope they will also “imagine something beyond their own self interest and well-being and serve the public good” (Giroux, 2019).

The harmony between criticality and hope (Ichikawa, 2022), between intellectualism and joy, between teaching and learning, are all part of what we continue to learn and experience as teacher educators. We agree that “the classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility” (hooks, 1994, p. 207). We are grateful to the former student teachers who joined us as contributors to this special issue for reminding us of this. We are excited to be engaged in meaningful research that informs our practices as university-based teacher educators. We are eager to contribute to making Aotearoa New Zealand a land where all children are learning alongside teachers who have had the space and support to see themselves as transformative intellectuals.

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