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Building a scholarship of teacher education: insights from South Africa

A construção de um corpo de conhecimento na formação de professores: perspectivas derivadas da África do Sul

Lee Rusznyak[1]
University of Witwatersrand
Lee.Rusznyak@wits.ac.za

Abstract: Teacher education is a relatively young field of scholarly inquiry that tends to react to policy changes rather than inform them. This paper uses the South African context to explore how a scholarship of teacher education can evolve in response to political and educational contestation. Drawing on Freire and Morrow, it shows how South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy created both the imperative and opportunity to rethink educational goals, institutional structures, and pedagogical practices. Key developments include the relocation of teacher education into universities, the establishment of research networks, and the creation of conceptual frameworks that are responsive to both local and global challenges. The paper argues that sustaining and advancing a scholarship of teacher education requires a strong collective voice, ongoing and critical engagement with policy, and empirical research that bridges conceptual rigour with the realities of classroom practice.

Keywords: scholarship; teacher education; South Africa

Resumo: A formação de professores é um campo relativamente jovem de investigação acadêmica que tende a reagir às mudanças nas políticas em vez de informá-las. Este artigo examina o contexto sul-africano para demonstrar como a construção de um corpo de conhecimento especializado de formação de professores evoluiu em reação a conflitos políticos e educacionais. Com base em Freire e Morrow, mostra como a transição da África do Sul do apartheid para a democracia criou um imperativo e uma oportunidade de

[1] School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

repensar os objetivos educacionais, as estruturas institucionais e as práticas pedagógicas. As transformações principais incluem a realocação da formação de professores para as universidades, o estabelecimento de redes de pesquisa e a criação de estruturas conceituais que respondam aos desafios locais e globais. O artigo argumenta que sustentar e promover o conhecimento dentro do campo de formação de professores requer uma forte voz coletiva, envolvimento contínuo e crítico com políticas e pesquisa empírica que una o rigor conceitual com as realidades da prática em sala de aula.

Palavras-chave: conhecimento especializado; formação de professores; África do Sul

Introduction

Teacher education is a relatively young field of scholarly inquiry, with research consisting overwhelmingly of small-scale case studies conducted in specific contexts (Deacon et al., 2010). While specialised areas—such as mathematics education, rural education, and inclusive education—have seen considerable development, less attention has been paid to how the various components of a teacher education curriculum work together to guide school-leavers through a coherent and structured process of pedagogical learning. Another symptom is what Biesta (2017, p. 27) calls the "*learnification*" of education, that is, a tendency to focus attention on "the activities of *studenting*, but not on the activities of *teaching*". This focus marginalises key questions about what preservice teachers need to learn and how teacher education curricula should be designed to support their professional learning.

As early as 1999, Zeichner observed the irony in how *unscholarly* the process of teacher education reform often is:

> Program development has often been a reaction to the mandates of state departments and legislatures more than it has been a thoughtful, analytic, and forward-looking process based on the attempt to implement a set of coherent, well-thought-out principles and ideas about what teachers need to know and need to be able to do (Zeichner, 1999, p. 12).

In the absence of robust theoretical frameworks supported by empirical research, teacher educators risk being primarily reactive to shifts in educational policy, rather than playing an active role in shaping them. At the same time, policy contestations and ideological transitions can serve as catalysts for rethinking and innovating teacher education. This makes the research and practices of teacher educators particularly important during periods of political instability, where governmental priorities and departmental structures may change rapidly. As Freire (1994) reminds us, pedagogical projects, such as teacher education, are never politically neutral. They serve particular interests and often operate either to reproduce or to challenge prevailing power relations and inequalities.

South Africa's transition from apartheid to a constitutional democracy offers a compelling case for examining how a scholarship of teacher education can emerge in response to broader socio-political change. Recent systematic reviews of global research and innovation in teacher education (e.g., Ananin; Lovakov, 2022; Ellis et al., 2023) identify South Africa as a significant contributor to this growing body of scholarship. The collapse of apartheid and the rebuilding of a new education system required South African educators to interrogate the foundational goals of teacher education, develop new theoretical insights, design alternative approaches to preparing future teachers, and analyse their impact and limitations. These processes helped advance teacher education as a rigorous scholarly pursuit with global relevance.

This paper builds on Robinson et al.'s (2024) analysis of how teacher education in South Africa has shifted in terms of its commitment to social justice and its attention to organising systematic learning over the last fifty years. By using the South African context, this paper shows how shifts in government priorities can create opportunities for scholars and teacher educators to participate in policy debates and, in doing so, contribute to a growing field of scholarship.

Teacher Education in South Africa: A brief context

Over the past thirty years, efforts in teacher education have focused on addressing its deeply fractured and unequal legacy left by apartheid and contributing to South Africa's broader nation-building efforts. Under the apartheid regime (1948–1994), state policy enforced racial segregation. It categorised the population into racial groups (namely, Black, White, Coloured, and Indian) and allocated resources to groups in vastly unequal measures. With the advent of democracy in 1994, South Africa began a transition towards a constitutional order that seeks to "heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights" (Preamble, Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

Education was positioned as central to this vision of national renewal. South Africa's first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela, expressed this conviction clearly:

> South Africa inherited a highly dysfunctional educational system from the apartheid era. It is one of our major tasks of reconstruction to build an educational system that provides quality opportunities for all our people...Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world (Mandela, 2003, s/p).

Nonetheless, structural inequality has proven challenging to dismantle. As Fataar (2022, p. 11) notes, the post-apartheid state has not yet fully transitioned "from an exclusionary colonial social structure to one that has become formally, if not substantively, inclusive." Socioeconomic disparities remain entrenched, and wealth distribution remains highly skewed. The wealthiest 1% of (mostly White) households hold 70.9% of

the country's total wealth, while the bottom 60% (mostly Black) own a mere 7.0% (Sulla; Zikhali, 2018, xvi).

Amid these enduring challenges, the field of teacher education has experienced significant policy shifts and scholarly debate. Researchers and policymakers have sought to reform and reimagine the role of teacher education, not only to improve educational outcomes but also to foster a more just and equitable society.

Training compliant teachers

Under apartheid, the development of a scholarship in teacher education was severely constrained by fragmented structures and uncritical approaches to teacher preparation. First, teacher education was administered across 19 separate governance departments, each operating under provincial or 'homeland' authorities responsible for racially segregated populations, including the so-called tribal areas designated for Black Africans. Each department imposed its own requirements, resulting in different qualifications and training pathways for student teachers depending on their racial classification (Parker, 2003). At the time, White teachers were required to complete twelve years of schooling and a three-year teaching diploma. In comparison, Black teachers needed only ten years of schooling for entry into a two-year teaching certificate. Teacher preparation took place in racially segregated training colleges. Although some rural and urban colleges offered rigorous programmes and produced highly regarded teachers, many others provided minimal academic engagement and limited teachers' understanding to a basic grasp of the school curriculum (Welch, 2002). Training was typically pitched at a low level of cognitive demand, privileging rote learning and basic classroom management over critical engagement with pedagogy and the purposes of education.

Second, teacher education during this period did little to develop teachers as scholars of teaching or as reflective researchers in their own classrooms. The prevailing discourse in many conservative training colleges was *Fundamental Pedagogics*, a theoretical framework that conceptualised education as a depoliticised activity, insulated from broader social concerns (Reagan, 1990). As Enslin (1990, p. 78) observed, it offered prospective teachers "neither a language of critique nor a language of possibility." Student teachers were actively discouraged from attending political meetings, interacting with students from other racial groups, or thinking about whose interests were served by apartheid schooling. Teacher training thus actively suppressed critical inquiry. In effect, Fundamental Pedagogics served to produce compliant civil servants who would ably implement (but neither question nor subvert) the apartheid curricula (Enslin, 1988;1990; Samuel, 2012).

Despite government attempts to restrict critical thinking, growing political consciousness and dissatisfaction with apartheid's educational policies prompted groups of teacher educators and students to challenge dominant ideologies and explore educational alternatives. Not all colleges adopted the principles of Fundamental Pedagogics with the more liberal institutions serving White students rejecting this framework. At the same time, colleges serving Black students became key sites of political and educational

resistance (Carolin, 2018). The emancipatory ideas of Paulo Freire, in particular, gained traction, offering new ways to conceptualise curriculum, pedagogy, and the social role of education.

Rejecting inferior education

With the growing momentum of anti-apartheid movements and the intensification of the armed struggle, the education system became a key site of political contestation. In response to widespread educational protests, the government commissioned the De Lange Report (1981), which recommended standardising teacher qualifications across racial groups. Although framed in the language of equal opportunity, the report's recommendations did little to alter the fragmented and unequal provision of teacher education, which remained both geographically and conceptually divided (Chisholm, 2019).

A decisive shift toward a social justice agenda in education occurred in 1986, when parents, teachers, students, and community organisations collectively rejected apartheid's inferior education system and began to envision alternatives. A landmark conference organised by the National Education Crisis Committee brought together stakeholders from across civil society to articulate a vision for *People's Education for People's Power*. This initiative promoted a non-racial democratic South Africa grounded in critical consciousness, cooperative learning, and community-engaged classroom practices (Centre for adult and continuing education, 1995).

As the resistance to apartheid intensified, progressive teacher educators began to reimagine teacher preparation in anticipation of a post-apartheid future. In one instance, an urban university in Johannesburg launched a four-year teacher education degree in 1980 that admitted students of all racial groups (Boyce, 1999). Its curriculum soon incorporated the principles of People's Education for People's Power. From 1980, lectures were delivered on a still-segregated teacher training college campus, resulting in the racial diversification of an otherwise White student cohort for the first time (Carrim et al., 2003). The curriculum encouraged students to analyse apartheid education critically (Christie, 1985) and examine how civil societies around the world bring about political change. Student teachers were introduced to multicultural and anti-racist pedagogies and were challenged to interrogate assumptions drawn from their own experiences of segregated schooling. Through these initiatives, teacher education began to move beyond technical training and policy compliance, fostering critical reflection and equipping future teachers to contribute to a more just and democratic society.

New beginnings

South Africa held its first democratic elections in 1994. With the adoption of the Constitution in 1996, the country entered a new phase of nation-building and transformation. A key imperative was to dismantle and discard all structures and systems perceived as tainted, including education, and build ones that reflected

the values of democracy, equality, and justice. However, the scale and complexity of transformation were daunting:

> How could education be redesigned into a system of quality to prepare all young people to share joint citizenship and also take their place in a rapidly globalising world? How could the new government run the education system and change it at the same time? Where to start and what to do? (Christie, 2008, p. 3).

In this context, *Outcomes-Based Education (OBE)* was introduced as a curriculum policy aimed at repudiating apartheid-style schooling. Drawing on the ideas of William Spady, the 1997 OBE policy acknowledged that apartheid education had "perpetuated race, class, gender, and ethnic divisions and emphasised separateness rather than common citizenship and nationhood" (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1997, p. 1). Mirroring the ethos of People's Education, OBE aimed to empower students by recognising their lived experiences and encouraging them to express their views and, seek out their own learning through discussion and self-directed learning. The curriculum defined a set of generic outcomes such as problem-solving, collaboration, and responsible self-management, intended to promote democratic values and learner agency (RSA, 1997, pp. 8–11).

However, education scholars expressed their grave concerns about using this approach. For example, Wally Morrow (2007, p. 27) warned that replacing one flawed system with its complete opposite traps one into the very dichotomies that undermine meaningful reform. He argued that devising a socially just education system required a clear conception of the core work of the teacher. He distinguished between formal access to schooling and providing students with *epistemological access*, that is, opportunities to engage meaningfully with structured bodies of knowledge during lessons. It follows that although teaching takes many forms, every act of teaching is an intentional act that "*organises systematic learning*" that leads students to "develop more resonant understandings" (Morrow, 2007, p. 63). These ideas became a cornerstone of post-apartheid education thinking and research (e.g., Shalem; Pendlebury, 2010), informing the development of education policies (e.g., Chisholm, 2005) and critiquing them (e.g., Allais, 2010).

Despite its intentions to promote social justice, OBE offered little possibility for quality education through systematic learning in most South African classrooms and was widely regarded as a dismal failure. Under this policy, knowledge was regarded as somewhat arbitrary, as outcomes-based approaches tended to ignore subjects and disciplines as bodies of systematised knowledge that need to be structured and sequenced in meaningful learning pathways (Allais, 2010). The authority of knowledge from subject disciplines was diminished as student opinions (regardless of the weight of evidence or reason) were considered legitimate contributions. Without the authority of subject learning, there were few clear principles on which to base teachers' selection of key concepts and design of appropriate learning pathways to meet the prescribed outcomes (Shalem, 2014).

The policy also introduced a false dichotomy between teacher-centred and learner-centred pedagogies, where the former was dismissed as authoritarian and the latter idealised as progressive. For a while, the word

'teacher' became disparaged; the preferred term 'facilitators' emphasised that their role was to let 'learners' discover knowledge for themselves, often from the pooled experiences of their peers or unguided exploration around the topic of the day. This shift, while well-intentioned, failed to convey to teachers their primary responsibility of organising systematic learning in a meaningful and ethical manner.

Although OBE aimed to promote social justice, it ultimately failed to enable quality education for most students, partially because it compromised systematic learning. Education scholars such as Jansen (1998), Morrow (2001), and Allais (2010) predicted and later analysed OBE's shortcomings, contributing to crucial scholarly debates around teaching, the selection and organising of knowledge and its implications for teacher education. These contributions were crucial in effecting further policy revisions.

Restructuring teacher preparation

Following the transition to democracy, a central priority in the teacher education sector was to create a unified and coordinated national framework. The government's vision was to establish:

> […] an overarching framework that attempts to chart a long-term vision of a coordinated and coherent system of initial and continuing professional education for teachers and focuses on the systemic role that teacher education plays in the overall transformation of education (RSA, 2006, p. 3).

This vision aimed to establish a teacher education system that was racially integrated, cost-effective, and capable of producing graduates with the knowledge and skills necessary to enhance education for all. Teaching was formally recognised as a graduate profession, and the preparation of teachers was transferred to the higher education sector (RSA, 1997). Making universities the sole providers of teacher education was thought to help consolidate the sector and elevate the professional status of teaching (Osman, 2010).

This institutional relocation created an opportunity to reshape teacher education. College-based programmes had traditionally focused on practical tips and routines with limited engagement with theory and research. In contrast, university-based programmes offered the potential to integrate professional practice with research-informed and theoretically grounded preparation (Parker, 2003; Samuel, 2012). Some teacher training colleges were incorporated into universities, while others were closed or repurposed (Kruss, 2008). The shift to universities also created enabling conditions for the development of a research culture in teacher education. Many college lecturers pursued postgraduate studies and completed doctorates, gradually assuming identities as research-active academics (Maodzwa-Taruvinga; Divala, 2014; Robinson; Mcmillan, 2006). These scholars began to contribute to a growing body of research that critically engaged with issues like curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher identities.

However, early attempts to design powerful teacher education curricula were constrained by a narrow outcomes-based logic. The first national teacher education policy (RSA, 2000) required graduating teachers

to demonstrate proficiency against 133 outcomes clustered under seven "roles of the educator": *subject specialist, learning mediator, pastoral carer, administrator, assessor, curriculum developer,* and *lifelong learner*. Teacher educators were expected to align their curricula with these roles by backwards-mapping outcomes to content and pedagogy. In practice, this approach led to overloaded and fragmented curricula, as programmes struggled to cover all roles within limited time frames.

This outcomes-based model drew significant criticism from education scholars (e.g., JANSEN, 1998). Wally Morrow (2007) was among the most influential voices challenging the conceptual foundation of the policy. He argued that defining teaching as a set of fragmented roles precluded an understanding of the coherence of teaching and imposed unrealistic demands on teachers and preparation programmes. Once again, Morrow argued that conceptual clarity is required to move the sector forward. From his concept of teaching as the *practice of organising systematic learning*, he argued that teacher education should "… enable someone to be more competent in the professional practice of organising systematic learning and nurture their commitment to do so" (Morrow, 2007, p. 69).

The capacity to organise systematic learning requires that teachers select and represent key concepts and sequence fit-for-purpose interactions that enable diverse students to access new knowledge. Morrow (2007, p. 84) outlined four core goals for teacher education:

1. A grounded conception of teaching as organising systematic learning.
2. Deep knowledge of subject content and appropriate pedagogies.
3. An understanding of the school context and how it shapes teaching.
4. The capacity to make informed decisions that support learning.

Morrow argued that strong theory was vital for transforming education practice and called for conceptually strong programmes that prepare teachers to take responsibility for organising students' systematic learning. His ideas became foundational in teacher education research and have been widely used to analyse, revise, and strengthen curriculum design (Rusznyak, 2015).

A national review of teacher education programmes confirmed the shortcomings identified by Morrow. The Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2010) found that the focus on educator roles and outcomes led to curricula that were fragmented, overcrowded, and often lacking a coherent theoretical foundation. The review concluded that many programmes were "not fit for purpose", with content designed to meet regulatory requirements rather than to develop critical, knowledgeable, and socially responsive educators. Instead of producing agents of educational change, the system risked training technically proficient, but theoretically underprepared, classroom practitioners.

The policy and curriculum critiques from scholars, as well as formal reviews, created momentum for a revised, conceptually stronger approach to teacher education. This moment marked a significant turning point in the development of research and scholarship in the field, where teacher education came to be increasingly shaped by theoretical clarity, empirical inquiry, and an explicit concern for knowledge, professionalism, and social justice.

A knowledge-based approach

Following the dismal failure of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) in the schooling sector and growing critiques of the outcomes-based approach to teacher education, the policy adopted a knowledge-based model. The revised policy, the *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* (MRTEQ), signals a decisive shift. It positions teacher education as a response to "the critical challenges facing education in South Africa today—especially the poor content and conceptual knowledge found amongst teachers, as well as the legacies of apartheid" (RSA, 2015, p. 8). Unlike its predecessor, the new policy explicitly rejects a "purely skills-based approach" that focuses "almost exclusively on evidence of demonstrable outcomes as measures of success, without paying attention to how knowledge should underpin these skills for them to impact effectively on learning" (ibid., p. 9). Instead, teaching is reframed as a "complex activity that is premised upon the acquisition, integration and application of different types of knowledge practices" (RSA, 2015, p. 9). Without a firm grounding in conceptual and theoretical knowledge, the policy warns, teacher education risks producing "technicians who may be able to replicate performance in similar contexts, but who are severely challenged when the context changes" (RSA, 2015, p. 9).

To respond to this complexity, MRTEQ requires that teacher education programmes offer a structured "mix" of different kinds of knowledge. These include:

- disciplinary and subject knowledge,
- general and subject-specific pedagogical knowledge,
- practical learning from engagement with teaching,
- situational knowledge of diverse schooling contexts, and
- foundational generic skills that support professional practice (RSA, 2015).

This emphasis on conceptually grounded, context-sensitive preparation aligns closely with Morrow's (2007) vision of teaching as the practice of *organising systematic learning*. Policy expects that different teacher knowledges "fuse together in the moments of practice" (RSA, 2015, p. 10). However, acquiring this knowledge is necessary but insufficient. Research indicates that connections between theory and practice are not always self-evident to novice teachers, particularly at the outset of their studies (Amin; Ramrathan, 2009; Langsford; Rusznyak, 2024). To cultivate these critical capabilities, teacher education programmes must provide explicit opportunities for student teachers to analyse lessons they observe and articulate the reasons for their teaching decisions (Rusznyak; Bertram, 2021). Working with textbooks, classroom footage, and reflective writing provides opportunities to investigate how knowledge is constructed and communicated in real-world classrooms (Walton; Rusznyak, 2014). Through this engagement, future teachers can begin to imagine more effective and equitable alternatives for practice. This raises a crucial line of inquiry within the scholarship of teacher education: What knowledge should teachers learn, and how should it be structured

within a curriculum to support informed and responsive decision-making in practice? The ability to bring together theoretical insight, contextual awareness, and ethical judgment is what enables teachers to act as agents of transformation in a profoundly unequal schooling system.

A growing body of scholarship has emerged to address the challenges of curriculum design, conceptual coherence and contextual responsiveness. Rusznyak (2015) emphasises that a key role of teacher educators is to design curricula that scaffold theoretical insights into meaningful pedagogic reasoning. In this view, the teacher education curriculum becomes more than a checklist of knowledge types—it must offer intentional, cumulative learning experiences that help student teachers recognise the merits and limits of different pedagogical approaches (Rusznyak, 2025; Rusznyak; Bertram, 2021). This requires not only understanding discrete knowledge domains but also using them as lenses for interpreting priorities and trade-offs in specific contexts (Carrim, 2019), engaging with ethical orientations (Sathorar; Geduld, 2018), and advancing transformation and social justice (America et al., 2021).

Another important area of scholarship in teacher education examines the relationship between teacher education and student outcomes. A central question remains: Has the shift to knowledge-based teacher education improved the quality of public schooling? Research by Armstrong (2015) indicates that younger teachers who graduated from university-based programmes possess stronger subject knowledge than their older colleagues, and their students tend to perform better on standardised assessments. However, systemic constraints persist, especially in rural and under-resourced schools. High levels of teacher absenteeism, overcrowding, poor infrastructure, and ineffective management practices continue to undermine the functioning of numerous schools (Fleisch, 2008; Needu, 2014; Taylor et al., 2013).

Analysis of SACMEQ III scores confirms this complex reality. While teacher knowledge does correlate with improved learner outcomes, students in the most disadvantaged schools remain subject to "multiple constraints" that "overshadow the impact of [better] teacher knowledge" (Spaull, 2011, p. 22). These findings highlight the limits of policy reform alone and underscore the need for continued theoretical and empirical work on how teacher knowledge interacts with broader systemic inequalities.

Supporting scholarship in teacher education

Policymakers in South Africa have increasingly endorsed research-led approaches to teacher education (e.g., Green, 2012), and draft policies are routinely circulated for stakeholder input. This wide consultation process enables researchers and teacher educators to offer critical feedback and contribute directly to the development of policies and initiatives aimed at improving teacher education practice (Venkat; Osman, 2012). Consequently, education researchers have played a central role in drafting policies, critiquing them (e.g., Morrow, 2007; Jansen; Christie, 1999), and conducting research that evaluates the impact of these policies on teaching and learning.

One notable example is the Initial Teacher Education Research Project (ITERP), which analysed the curricula of five universities offering teacher education (Deacon, 2016). Its findings informed subsequent

policy revisions and led to the development of knowledge and practice standards through the Primary Teacher Education (PrimTEd) initiative. Within this initiative, teacher educators from various institutions collaborated to identify the core knowledge and competencies required by pre-service teachers in key areas, such as literacy (Taylor; Mawoyo, 2022), numeracy (Roberts, 2020; Taylor, 2021), and inclusive education (Walton; Rusznyak, 2019).

At the same time, broad consultation with stakeholders brings its own challenges and contestations, which must be carefully considered. Walton and Rusznyak (2019, p. 98) describe how diverse stakeholders generated a "coherent and owned set of [inclusive education] standards" by addressing dilemmas through the traditional African way of seeking consensus. A consensus position is attained when all stakeholders feel that "adequate account has been taken of their points of view without necessarily reaching a point of total agreement" (Wiredu, 1996, p. 54). Drawing on Wiredu's (1996) understanding, consensus does not imply total agreement, but rather a collective sense that all viewpoints have been sufficiently considered. As such, the final position may not fully satisfy every party, but it is seen as acceptable within the context of competing priorities and perspectives.

A growing body of research is now examining how teacher practices are enacted in varying classroom contexts (e.g., Hoadley, 2007; Nkambule; Mukeredzi, 2017), across subject areas (e.g., Mavhunga; Ndlovu, 2023; Venkat; Mathews, 2024), through different instructional strategies (e.g., Fleisch; Schöer, 2023; Hoadley, 2024), and at different stages of student teacher development (e.g., Rusznyak, 2025). These studies are contributing to an evolving evidence base that not only informs teacher education policy but also strengthens theoretical understandings of professional learning and pedagogic practice.

Support for research-led teacher education has also been institutionalised through the creation of dedicated structures and academic positions. In addition to the policy initiatives mentioned, several associations for education researchers have been established, some with special interest groups in teacher education. The establishment of research chairs, such as the *UNESCO Chair in Teacher Education for Diversity and Development* and a *South African Research Chair Initiative in Teacher Education*, have sought to advance the scholarly-praxis agenda. These structures have supported research into the experiences and perceptions of pre-service teachers and other stakeholders during coursework and school-based practicum (e.g., Sayed et al., 2018).

Taking scholarship to the profession

Insights from scholarship have limited impact when they remain confined to academic discourse and fail to translate into professional transformation. While this remains an ongoing challenge, there are notable instances where scholarly engagement has informed professional practice. One such example is the development of the South African Council for Educators (SACE) national Professional Teaching Standards (PTS), created in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders, including academics, teacher unions, policymakers, and non-governmental education organisations. These standards articulate essential,

interlinked components of professional classroom practice specific to the South African context. Teaching is understood as:

> […] complex work in which educators draw on different knowledge and skills to decide how best to create suitable learning opportunities for their learners, often in very challenging contexts. Teachers are expected to make wise decisions in situations that are often unpredictable, and always to be guided by a moral commitment to act in the best educational interests of their learners (Sace, 2019).

The standards reflect the influence of both the lessons learned from rebuilding the post-apartheid education system and scholarly approaches to teaching. Rather than functioning as mere policy implementers, professional teachers are now expected to "identify and challenge policies and practices that discriminate against, marginalise or exclude [students]" (Sace, 2019, PTS3). They are encouraged to move beyond compliance and become agents of change by actively engaging in educational debates, curriculum development initiatives, and broader professional issues. This engagement should support "ongoing personal, academic and professional growth through reflection, study, reading, and research" (Sace, 2019, PTS2).

In contrast to the memorisation of atomistic facts under apartheid, and the fragmented, decontextualised treatment of subject knowledge during the OBE era, the standards now require that teachers "understand the subject/s they teach as bodies of knowledge in which important concepts are connected to one another" (Sace, 2019, PTS5). Teachers are expected to engage in systematic learning by recognising how "important ideas and skills are built up across different years of learning" and designing "coherent units of lessons with meaningful learning activities and assessments" (Sace, 2019, PTS8). This represents a significant departure from the role of passive facilitator towards that of a knowledgeable, intentional organiser of learning.

Given that the South African education system is undergoing a process of transformation, it is crucial that teachers refrain from simply replicating ineffective, yet widespread, practices (Rusznyak; Bertram, 2021). Instead, professional teachers are expected to "make thoughtful choices about their teaching that lead to learning goals for all" and to "account for the design, delivery and assessment of lessons to themselves, their colleagues and to other stakeholders" (Sace, 2019, PTS6). These forms of accountability open teaching to critical peer scrutiny and, potentially, contribute to strengthening the profession by grounding practice in theoretical insight and empirical evidence in ways that were highly constrained during the times of Fundamental Pedagogics and OBE.

The PTS were finalised after two years of collaborative deliberation, followed by extensive consultation and field testing with practising teachers. Although the standards are still far from being fully realised in everyday practice, they articulate an aspirational vision of what professional teaching can look like in South African classrooms. Since their adoption, all teacher development initiatives are required to demonstrate how they support teachers in working towards achieving these standards.

Conclusion

While teacher education globally has often suffered from fragmentation and policy reactivity, South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy created opportunities for sustained theoretical, empirical, and practice-based inquiry. The contestations and struggles that drove this transformation affirm Freire's (1994) assertion that education is never neutral. This paper has shown how post-apartheid reconstruction efforts necessitated a fundamental reconsideration of the goals of teacher education, its institutional structures, curriculum design, and teacher identities and practices. Significant gains have been made, including conceptual development, the institutional relocation of teacher education into universities, and the formation of research networks. However, persistent challenges remain, such as enduring inequalities, shifting policy agendas, the ongoing pursuit of decolonised curricula, and the continued need to connect theoretical insights with classroom practice.

As Zeichner (1999) and Biesta (2017) caution, the marginalisation of teaching as a scholarly practice and the lack of coherence in curriculum design continue to pose serious concerns for the field. The future of teacher education lies in deepening scholarly inquiry, fostering critical dialogue, and strengthening its capacity to drive transformation from within. Sustaining progress will require a strong collective voice among teacher educators, active engagement with policy and practices, and research that bridges conceptual rigour with contextual realities of today's classrooms.

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