

Editorial

Lee Rusznyak

School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
Lee.Rusznyak@wits.ac.za
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6835-8215>

Maureen Robinson

Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa
mrobinson@sun.ac.za
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1963-7629>

Heloise Sathorar

Faculty of Education; Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa
Heloise.Sathorar@mandela.ac.za
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4947-0885>

Melanie Luckay

Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of the Western Cape, Belville, South Africa
mluckay@uwc.ac.za
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8601-1215>

The complexities of learning to teach: Advancing the debates

This special issue was motivated by a need to respond to two discourses on teacher education that have recently become prevalent in South Africa. The first is informed by size and shape concerns such as teacher supply and demand (Green et al., 2014), graduation and attrition rates, and the need for teachers in particular subjects (van der Berg et al., 2020). These are important concerns since they guide decisions about enrolment planning and the allocation of student funding into priority subjects and phases. The second is about the quality and substance of teacher preparation that ensures that future teachers have the knowledge, skills, and commitment to offer quality learning opportunities to those whom they teach.

There are tensions between these two priorities. Faced with projected short-term teacher shortages, proposals have been made for school-based internships as a cost-effective way of

rapidly increasing the number of qualified teachers in the education system (Hofmeyr, 2016; Shiohira et al., 2022). However, claims that alternative routes potentially address concerns about the quality of teaching preparation have yet to be supported by an empirical research base grounded in the South African context. Some versions of the internship route, with their emphasis on school and classroom exposure, run the risk of either privileging practice over theory, or treating them as separated components of teacher preparation. Our concern is that what is often missing from the consideration of models and interventions for preparing teachers for the South African context is a deep appreciation of the complexities of learning to teach, and an acknowledgement of the growing body of evidence-based research that supports quality teacher preparation.

As a contribution to the debate and to this research base, the Special Interest Group on Initial Teacher Education of the South African Education Research Association (SAERA) invited teacher educators and researchers to consider the complexities involved in developing curricula and interventions that support pre-service teachers as they learn to teach. Authors were invited to submit studies on how future teachers are being prepared to consider a range of priorities in their pedagogic choices. These include subject/phase specific pedagogic considerations, varying contextual priorities, ethical imperatives, linguistic complexities, diverse learning needs, new modes of curriculum delivery, and national priorities for inclusion, transformation, and decolonisation. The group sought papers that could contribute conceptual debates, empirical research, theoretical explorations, and innovative practices that illustrate how South African teacher educators work within and between these complexities to prepare students for conceptually informed, contextually responsive teaching practices.

Recent initiatives in teacher education in South Africa

This special issue is located against a background of several recent teacher education initiatives taking place across the country. The South African teacher education sector has come a long way since it was fragmented and managed by 17 governmental authorities, with neither a national policy nor a substantial research base (Welch, 2002). Following the dismal failure of an outcomes-based approach that expected teacher preparation to be designed around seven Roles of the Educator (Department of Education, 2000), a policy shift led to the adoption of a knowledge-based approach to teacher preparation. The revised policy, known as the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) (2011, revised 2015), moved away from listing many discrete outcomes. It regards teaching as a complex and integrated praxis, and offers a vision of graduate teachers as knowledgeable, adaptable practitioners.

Teaching is a complex activity that is premised upon the acquisition, integration and application of different types of knowledge practices or learning. A purely skills-based approach, which relies 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, will produce technicians who may be able to replicate performance in similar contexts, but who are

severely challenged when the context changes. (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015, p. 9)

This policy requires that teacher preparation curricula offer an appropriate mix of different bodies of knowledge and opportunities for various kinds of learning. However, different bodies of knowledge do not in themselves guarantee effective practice. An essential role of teacher education is to provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to (1) access relevant bodies of knowledge that inform their work as teachers and (2) draw on them to guide their decision-making and judgement in the enactment of practice (Bertram & Rusznyak, 2021). This requires that different bodies of knowledge are both understood and used as a basis for reasoning in practice, together with other issues such as priorities and opportunities in their context (Carrim, 2019), the curriculum's ethical orientations (Sathorar and Geduld, 2018), and the imperative for transformation and agency (America et al., 2021).

In addition to this policy intervention, there have been several important recent initiatives in the South African teacher education sector that have sought to advance a scholarly-praxis agenda. A research-led approach to teacher education has been advanced through the establishment and activities of the Unesco Chair in Teacher Education for Diversity and Development¹ as well as a South African Research Chair Initiative in Teacher Education.² Two recent systematic reviews found that a significant number of research publications in the field of teacher education emanated from South Africa (Ananin & Lovakov, 2022; Ellis, et al., 2023). In addition, two major national studies on the state of teacher education and curricula have taken place. The first, conducted by the Council on Higher Education, released its report in 2010, while the second, the Initial Teacher Education Research Project (ITERP), was conducted as a collaboration between the Education Deans' Forum, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), and JET Education Services. The findings of the Council on Higher Education that the uneven conceptual underpinnings of teacher education curricula constituted a major challenge to the sector informed the knowledge-based approach taken by the MRTEQ policy developers. All initial teacher education curricula were required to be redesigned and reaccredited in line with MRTEQ's policy changes. Despite the fact that ITERP analysed initial teacher education curricula offerings before programmes were reaccredited to align with MRTEQ requirements, the findings of ITERP (Deacon, 2016) have been used to inform curriculum adjustments and subsequent sector initiatives to strengthen teacher preparation programmes.

In one such initiative, the findings of ITERP (Deacon, 2016) led to the establishment of the Primary Teacher Education (PrimTEd) project. Through PrimTEd, networks of teacher educators working across different institutions have collaborated to identify the fundamental knowledge and practices to be taught to pre-service teachers across the sector. As a result, teacher education knowledge and practice standards have been developed for the teaching of literacy (Taylor & Mawoyo, 2022); numeracy (Alex & Roberts, 2019; Taylor, 2021);

1 See <https://www.wits.ac.za/education/research-centres/unesco-chair-in-teacher-education-for-diversity--development/>

2 See <https://www.cput.ac.za/research-technology-and-innovation/centres/cite>

inclusive education in teacher preparation programmes (Walton & Rusznyak, 2019) and work-integrated learning (PrimTED, 2019).

Despite the active engagement of teacher educators and researchers in promoting research-led education (see Brennan, 2020; Osman and Venkat, 2012), a strong notion of teaching as a craft-occupation that privileges tacit practical knowledge (Winch, 2017) continues to circulate among various NGOs and private donors with interests in supporting apprenticeship models of education, particularly in the independent schooling sector. Extended internships have been advocated as a rapid and cost-effective way of addressing an expected short-term teaching shortage. The question then becomes one about how an appreciation of complexity and depth can be infused into prevalent discourses so that expectations of competency are fundamentally premised on deliberation, ethics, and agency. It is this concern that papers in this special issue seek to address.

The contributions to this special issue

Drawing on her involvement with ITERP, Bertram, in her paper, is concerned with how teacher education can compensate for novice teachers' reality shock, thus offering a crucially important contribution to the debate. She argues that teacher education is neither a silver bullet nor an ineffective intervention in preparing student teachers for the realities of teaching. Although classroom life is diverse and can be unpredictable, the conceptualisation, organisation, and enactment of learning requires principled knowledge and thoughtful consideration of different possibilities. Many of the decisions that effective teachers take are thus not idiosyncratic in nature or made according to personal preferences. While university-based coursework cannot supply ready-made answers to the context-specific dilemmas that arise in practice, theoretical and contextual knowledge provides teachers with invaluable insights and discernment about ethical and principled teaching choices for the relevant content and contextual priorities. Bertram makes a compelling argument that the very point of teacher education is to provide principled and rational grounds for decisions that need to be worked out given the priorities, opportunities, and challenges of different teaching contexts.

One of the crucial priorities for teacher education is to ensure the strong content knowledge of pre-service teachers in the subjects they teach. The paper by Roberts and Mort addresses developments in the assessment of literacy practices of pre-service teachers as part of the PrimTED project. An initial testing of the subject and pedagogical knowledge of newly qualified teachers during ITERP indicated areas of concern. In light of these findings, some universities moved beyond MRTEQ requirements and amended their curricula to ensure that primary education students undertake extended studies over several years to ensure their competence in numeracy/mathematics and the teaching of literacies/languages. Roberts and Mort address the subsequent need to refine and extend the testing of final year pre-service teachers to ensure that assessment instruments are fit for purpose and that they work across diverse contexts.

The vision of a professional cohort of thinking, reasoning teachers can bring teacher education into some tension with the structure of the current schooling system. Several papers

in this issue address the tension that arises between the current schooling and policy contexts and potentially powerful interventions that could prepare future teachers to be agents of change. Maistry's paper problematises the assumptions that underpin the existing Economics FET Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) curriculum. He critiques the way in which it presents capitalism as an unproblematic and uncontested economic structure. As part of the imperative to decolonise and teach for greater social justice, he argues for the use of approaches from philosophy that trouble assumptions about how the subject is constructed and presented in the national curriculum. He argues that future teachers need to be prepared to be critical thinkers in relation to their subjects, not merely trained in the implementation of the current curriculum. Their ability to see beyond the current curriculum and prevalent practices is essential for the transformation of the education system.

In similar vein, Nkealah and Simango address the ways in which the current schooling system undermines attempts by teacher education to prepare future teachers. They argue that teacher educators have an obligation to prepare future teachers to use critical pedagogies in their teaching of literature. This pedagogic approach promotes literacy development while simultaneously addressing crucially important issues in society. They point to the way in which inconsistencies in the goals and requirements of CAPS and the highly prescriptive Annual Teaching Plans drastically constrain opportunities for newly qualified teachers to use such empowering pedagogic interventions effectively. They note that in this way, policy and institutional contexts effectively undermine the purpose of teacher education policy to prepare teachers who can offer transformative learning opportunities to the classes they teach.

In her discussion on pedagogic learning in deeply rural contexts, Pennefather discusses the importance of contextual responsiveness in developing teaching practices. Her paper highlights the situated nature of pre-service teacher learning as well as the multidimensional and expansive nature of the learning that can emerge through mediation. In moving outside of their comfort zones, pre-service teachers in a rural area were exposed to opportunities for deep learning and the development of professional knowledge. She shows how the unique situation of shared living and working space influenced the development of the pre-service teacher-university tutor relationships and practices. She explains how, through collaborative inquiry groups, students were able to confer in authentic and meaningful ways on challenges, strategies, and successes in a deeply rural context.

Facing up to the complexity of learning to teach is not restricted to the South African situation. Working in the Australian context, Fitzgerald, Goff, and White offer insights from teacher educators working within the requirements of a continually shifting teacher education reform policy, increasing standardisation, and more strident accountability measures. Narrative accounts illustrate the dilemmas of three teacher educators as they try to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, different community settings, and a profession that is well prepared for current and future challenges. Importantly, the article reminds us that, despite competing demands and external forces, teacher educators still inhabit a space of influence and agency. As they position themselves within the many

curriculum dilemmas, so teacher educators are able to develop pro-active strategies for responsive and forward-looking curriculum planning.

The final paper in this special issue discusses a situation that has become more prevalent in recent years, that of hybrid learning in teacher education. Mulaudzi, Du Toit, and Golightly locate their paper within a problem-based approach to Technology education and explore the experience of giving a voice to students in their learning process. According to these authors, it is important to understand how students perceive problem-based learning and how this approach can be refined to increase student participation and active involvement in their education. Data collected from the implementation of a hybrid problem-based module shows that the socially constructed knowledge development and meaning-making process were perceived positively by students and the module facilitator, and that it motivated students to learn. Furthermore, Technology student teachers reported the sessions as having been significant in improving their Electrical Technology content knowledge and fostering their 21st-century skills development.

SAERA's Special Interest Group on Initial Teacher Education

The range of complexities in learning to teach articulated by the authors in this special issue confirms our reservations about attempts to short-cut the potential value offered by teacher education programmes that offer both access to bodies of knowledge and mediated opportunities to see theory in practice and vice versa. Here we are not merely referring to implementing protocols learned in coursework, but are, rather, using theoretical insights to understand the successes, failures, and incidents that occur in practice and students' own learning as future teachers. It also means using observations and experiences in practice to extend or challenge what is learned theoretically. Models of teacher preparation that offer parallel or alternating sessions of coursework and school-based learning without bringing them into meaningful relation with each other offer, potentially, inert theory and stagnant practice (Walton & Rusznyak, 2020). Although some pre-service teachers may see links and transfer insights across the boundaries, others remain trapped in a theory-practice divide.

In a context in which teacher professionalism and innovation are under threat through mechanisms like scripted lessons, it is essential that teacher educators continue to create knowledgeable, reasoning, ethical, and responsive practitioners whose practices can transcend compliance with the status quo. We are concerned by the possibility of any moves toward de-professionalisation of the teaching sector that replace an explicit knowledge base with a tacit one, as in extended internships that are predominantly school-based with tenuous links to university-based learning. Without understanding teaching and learning theoretically, and how teaching practices are enacted in contextually appropriate ways, there is a risk that pre-service teachers will either revert to delivering education in the same manner in which they were taught (Borg, 2004; Rusznyak, 2009) or adopt prevalent practices irrespective of their effectiveness (Rusznyak et al., 2022). In the South African context where inequalities, ineffective practices, and prejudices shape pre-service teachers' perceptions of normalised schooling, Amin and Ramathan (2009, p. 73) have argued for the need to "reframe

memories” about schooling and to “disrupt their suppositions about schools based on [pre-service teachers’] biographical experiences.”

Given the time demands on teachers, there is a tendency for teachers to focus on showing their teaching rather than explicating the reasoning that informs their practices to the students they mentor (Loughran, 2019). The large-scale cross disciplinary study of Grossman et al. (2009) showed that learning in work-based contexts, under the mentoring of an experienced practitioner, requires a conceptual language of practice that enables them to decompose practice, and “provide targeted feedback on students’ efforts to enact the components of practice” (p. 2075).

The development of such a language of practice needs to go hand in hand with exposure to, and practice in, the practical skills of classroom management and materials development. Similarly, it is our view that mentor training needs to focus on more than understanding roles and responsibilities, providing support, and encouraging reflection. Mentors also need a shared analytic conceptual language that enables them to have learning conversations with novices about their mediation of content knowledge, the value of learning activities, the appropriateness of pedagogic decisions taken in response to contextual priorities, and the overall effectiveness of their developing teaching practices.

In summary, teacher education goes far beyond skilling workers to be workplace ready. It also requires that future teachers understand the logics that inform teaching practices and the grounds on which some pedagogic choices are more appropriate than others. They need to navigate their own personal experiences of schooling (Samuel, 2009) and consider the demands of the subject, priorities, challenges, and opportunities of the context and the support needs of learners. While the current system reduces teachers to implementors of materials through mechanisms like highly prescriptive Annual Teaching Plans, scripted lesson plans, and pre-designed materials, we envisage future teachers who do more than copy prevalent practices irrespective of their effectiveness or appropriateness. For them to advance the transformation of the education system, they need to have a strong knowledge base, contextual understanding, and the capacity to use that knowledge base to make reasoned and responsive choices in their teaching decisions (Loughran, 2019).

It is against this background that in 2016, members of SAERA established a special interest group (SIG) in initial teacher education to advance scholarly debate in this area. This special issue of the *Journal of Education* is one of its initiatives that seek to put the quality of teacher education and its complexities on the research agenda. Without access to such depth, there is a danger that pre-service teachers learn to replicate prevalent practices in the context regardless of their effectiveness and without interrogating their unintended exclusionary effects. The papers in this issue contribute to our understanding of teacher education as working at the intersection of vastly different social and educational histories, a complex set of knowledge practices, diverse contextual priorities, opportunities and challenges, and ethical priorities. Through highlighting the practices and reflections of teacher educators themselves, the papers illustrate the intersecting set of theoretical, political, social, and/or educational imperatives that drive the curriculum design and pedagogical choices of teacher

educators. Building on existing scholarship, we hope that the papers in this special issue surface philosophies and practices of teacher educators from the Global South, to understand how these inform curriculum and pedagogy, and to consider how local debates on teacher education contribute to international scholarship.

References

- America, C., Edwards, N., & Robinson, M. (2021). *Teacher education for transformative agency: Critical perspectives on design, content and pedagogy*. African Sun Media. <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480938>
- Alex, J., & Roberts, N. (2019). The need for relevant initial teacher education for primary mathematics: Evidence from the Primary Teacher Education project in South Africa. In N. Govender, R. Mudaly, T. Mthetwa & A. Singh-Pillay (Eds.), *Book of proceedings, 27th annual conference of the Southern African Association for Research in Mathematics, Science and Technology Education* (pp. 59–72). [www.uj.ac.za >faculties>education](http://www.uj.ac.za/faculties/education)[[http://www.uj.ac.za >faculties%20education](http://www.uj.ac.za/faculties/education)]
- Amin, N., & Ramathan, P. (2009). Preparing students to teach in and for diverse contexts: A learning to teach approach. *Perspectives in Education, 27*(1), 69–77.
- Borg, M. (2004). The apprenticeship of observation. *English Language Teaching Journal, 58*(3), 274–276. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/58.3.274>
- Brennan, M. (2020) An agenda for reinventing teacher education in South Africa: Next steps for deliberation. In C. America, N. Edwards & M. Robinson (Eds.), *Teacher education for transformative agency* (pp. 169–181). SUNMedia. <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928480938>
- Carrim, N. (2019). Complexities of professional practice in South African education. *Southern African Review of Education, 25*(1), 35–51. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-1877c79d30>
- Council on Higher Education. (2010). *Report on the national review of academic and professional programmes in education* (HE Monitor No. 11). https://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/Higher_Education_Monitor_11.pdf
- Deacon, R. (2016). *The initial teacher education research project: Final report*. JET Education Services. <https://www.jet.org.za/resources/deacon-iterp-final-composite-report.pdf>
- Department of Education. (2000). *Norms and standards for educators*. <https://www.gov.za/documents/national-education-policy-act-norms-and-standards-educators>

- Department of Higher Education and Training. (2015, February 19). *Revised policy on the minimum requirements for teacher education qualifications*.
https://www.dhet.gov.za/Teacher%20Education/National%20Qualifications%20Framework%20Act%2067_2008%20Revised%20Policy%20for%20Teacher%20Education%20Qualifications.pdf
- Ellis, V., Correia, C., Turvey, K., Childs, A., Andon, N., Harrison, C., Jones, J., & Hayati, N. (2023). Redefinition/redirection and incremental change: A systematic review of innovation in teacher education research. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 121*, 103918. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103918>
- Green, W., Adendorff, M., & Mathebula, B. (2014). 'Minding the gap?' A national foundation phase teacher supply and demand analysis: 2012–2020. *South African Journal of Childhood Education, 4*(3), 2–23. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v4i3.222>
- Grossman, P., Compton, C., Igra, D., Ronfeldt, M., Shahan, E., & Williamson, P. W. (2009). Teaching practice: A cross-professional perspective. *Teachers College Record, 111*(9), 2055–2100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146810911100905>
- Hofmeyr, J. (2016). *International literature review on alternative teacher education pathways*. Prepared for the Zenex Foundation. Johannesburg: JET Education Services. <https://admin.jet.org.za/resources/international-literature-review-on-alternative-ite-pathways-final-160922for-web.pdf>
- Loughran, J. (2019). Pedagogical reasoning: The foundation of the professional knowledge of teaching. *Teachers and Teaching, 25*(5), 523–535. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2019.1633294>
- Osman, R., & Venkat, H. (2012). *Research-led teacher education*. Pearson.
- PrimTEd. (2019). *Teaching practice: Guidelines for initial teacher education programmes*. Department of Higher Education and Training, Primary Teacher Education Project. <https://www.jet.org.za/clearinghouse/projects/primted/curriculum-frameworks/work-integrated-learning-1/teachingpracticeguidelines2020.pdf/view>
- Rusznyak, L., & Bertram, C. (2021). Conceptualising work-integrated learning to support pre-service teachers' pedagogic reasoning. *Journal of Education, 83*, 34–52. <https://doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i83a02>
- Rusznyak, L., Walton, E., & Kenny, J. (2022). Pre-service teachers' experiences of schooling: Implications for preparation for inclusive education. *South African Journal of Education, 42*(3), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v42n3a2090>
- Rusznyak, L. (2009). Confronting the 'pedagogical immunity' of student teachers. *Education as Change, 13*(2), 263–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16823200903234794>

- Samuel, M. (2009). On becoming a teacher: Life history research and the force-field model of teacher development. In M. A. Samuel, R. Dhunpath & M. Samuel (Eds.), *Life history research: Epistemology, methodology and representation* (pp. 1–17). Brill Sense. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789087908584_002
- Sathorar, H., & Geduld, D. (2018). Towards decolonising teacher education: Reimagining the relationship between theory and praxis. *South African Journal of Education, 38*(4), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v38n4a1714>
- Shiohira, K., Lefko-Everett, K., Molokwane, P., Mabelle, T., Tracey-Temba, L., & McDonald, Z. (2022). *Training better teachers: An implementation brief for improving practice-based initial teacher education: A TICZA report*. JET Education Services. <https://www.jet.org.za/news/training-better-teachers-an-implementation-brief-for-improving-practice-based-initial-teacher-education>
- Taylor, N. (2021). The dream of Sisyphus: Mathematics education in South Africa. *South African Journal of Childhood Education, 11*(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v11i1.911>
- Taylor, N., & Mawoyo, M. (2022). Professionalising teaching: The case of language and literacy. In N. Spaul & E. Pretorius (Eds.), *Early grade reading in South Africa* (pp. 164–178). Oxford Press. <https://www.calameo.com/oxford-university-press-south-africa/read/00671075301e9fca7596a>
- Van der Berg, S., Gustafsson, M., & Burger, C. (2020). *School teacher supply and demand in South Africa in 2019 and beyond*. Department of Higher Education and Training. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4213003>
- Walton, E., & Rusznyak, L. (2019). Developing standards for inclusive teaching in South Africa: A dilemma analysis. *Southern African Review of Education with Education with Production, 25*(1), 89–106. <https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC-1877d86fcc>
- Walton, E., & Rusznyak, L. (2020). Cumulative knowledge-building for inclusive education in initial teacher education. *European Journal of Teacher Education, 43*(1), 18–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2019.1686480>
- Welch, T. (2002). Teacher education in South Africa before, during and after apartheid: An overview. In J. Adler & Y. Reed (Eds.), *Challenges of teacher development: An investigation of take-up in South Africa* (pp. 17–52). Van Schaik. <https://libarch.nmu.org.ua/bitstream/handle/GenofondUA/4875/2d66209375337fb33c23cdbe6e008e4b.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- Winch, C. (2017). *Teachers' know-how: A philosophical investigation*. Wiley.