

Who Teaches the Teachers?

Reforming Initial Teacher Education in New Zealand

Michael Johnston and Stephanie Martin

The most important component of any system of school education is its teachers. But, New Zealand's teacher education programmes do not ensure that new teachers are well prepared for the classroom.

New Zealand's Teachers Colleges were merged with universities during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The aim was to improve the professional standing of teachers. But the current university model of teacher education has six serious flaws:

- An overly sociocultural philosophy of teaching
- Insufficient focus on the science of learning
- Too little practical classroom experience for teachers-in-training
- Inconsistency in the quality of mentoring for teachers in training
- No rigorous assessment of new teachers for classroom readiness
- Poor preparation of primary teachers to teach across the curriculum, especially in mathematics and science.

At the heart of these deficiencies lie the *Standards for the Teaching Profession*. All teachers must be assessed as meeting these standards to be able to practice lawfully.

Teacher education programmes must put their graduates on track to meet the *Standards* after two years of classroom practice. In this way, they are influential on teacher education.

Unfortunately, the *Standards* do not exert the positive influence on teacher education that they should. They are too vague and 'high level.' They do not describe specific, observable acts of teaching. They do not require teachers to demonstrate that the young people in their classrooms actually learn. The process for assessing teachers against the *Standards* is weak and unreliable.

Rigorous professional standards would give teacher education providers a strong incentive to equip teachers-in-training with the knowledge, skill, practical experience and high-quality mentoring required to make them classroom ready.

If the standards required teachers to be able to apply insights from the science of learning in the classroom, teacher education programmes would have to prepare them to do that. If they required core content knowledge, the programmes would have to equip them with that knowledge.

Reforming the *Standards for the Teaching Profession*, then, would unlock reform of teacher education. But enacting such reform is not straightforward.

The *Standards* are set by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand. The Council is the professional body for teachers. A majority of its members are elected by the teaching profession. This, appropriately, gives the profession ownership of their standards through the representatives they elect to the Teaching Council.

Any move by a Minister of Education to legislate professional standards for teachers would deprofessionalise teachers. Even more seriously, it would politicise teaching – successive Ministers could impose their own ideologies on the profession through alterations to the *Standards*.

Instead of a political solution, we recommend enabling multiple professional bodies for teachers to be established. We suggest replacing the section of the Education and Training Act that establishes the Teaching Council with legislation setting out requirements for setting up professional bodies for teachers.

The aim is for groups of schools with similar values and educational philosophies to establish their own professional bodies. Each body would have its own set of professional standards. They may also establish teacher education programmes that prepare teachers for their standards.

Each professional teaching body should have to demonstrate that its standards meet minimum technical requirements. They should refer to specific acts of teaching. They should be based on valid and reliable evidence. There should be rigorous assessment

processes to ensure that teachers meet them. The existing *Standards for the Teaching Profession* would fail on all three counts.

To measure their progress, teaching bodies should be required to assess a sample of students taught by its members each year. These data should be published as evidence of the effectiveness of each set of professional standards and the associated teacher education programmes. Over time, the most effective professional bodies and their standards would predominate.

We recommend establishing a small, operationally focussed agency to ensure that a proposed set of professional standards meets the technical requirements before implementation. It would provide expertise to assist in developing standards and associated assessment for new teachers. It would also conduct and publish the assessment of the student samples.

Our recommendations would not be a quick fix for initial teacher education. They would, however, result in more durable change than a political approach. They would also establish a mechanism for ongoing refinement and improvement.

AUTHORS

Michael Johnston is a Senior Research Fellow at the New Zealand Initiative. He is a cognitive psychologist by training and completed his PhD at the University of Melbourne in 1997. He commenced his academic career as a lecturer in psychology and became interested in educational assessment and measurement during a six-year tenure as Senior Statistician at the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. In 2011 he took up an academic role in the Faculty of Education at Victoria University of Wellington, where, prior to his appointment at the New Zealand Initiative in 2022, he was Associate Dean (Academic).

Stephanie Martin is a primary school teacher and an Adjunct Fellow at the New Zealand Initiative. In 2016 she graduated from the University of Auckland with a Master's degree in Ancient History and a Master of Teaching (Primary). During her studies, she held positions as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and Lecturer and contributed to innovations to the assessment of practica for the Master of Teaching (Primary). She completed a Graduate Diploma in Applied Psychology in 2022. At the Initiative, Stephanie builds on her work in the classroom. She develops evidence-informed policy advice to improve teaching and learning in New Zealand schools.