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# Acts of resistance in an age of compliance:

teacher educators, professional knowledge-making and self-study

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Significant structural reforms are reshaping the landscape of teacher education in many countries. Such reforms typically increase the standardisation of teaching practice so that teacher education becomes a mechanism for achieving ends determined elsewhere, with teacher educators (TEs) as the delivery service for these predetermined ends. In this article, I explore the implications of this situation for the professional knowledge and status of TEs, and argue that, both individually and collectively, TEs need to recognise and take action to assert their professional position as empowered, active and legitimate knowledge-makers about teaching practice. I draw on Clandinin & Connelly's (1995) concept of professional knowledge landscapes and their 'secret' and 'sacred' stories as a tool to examine these ideas, and the methodology of self-study as one means of reshaping the professional knowledge landscape of teacher education.

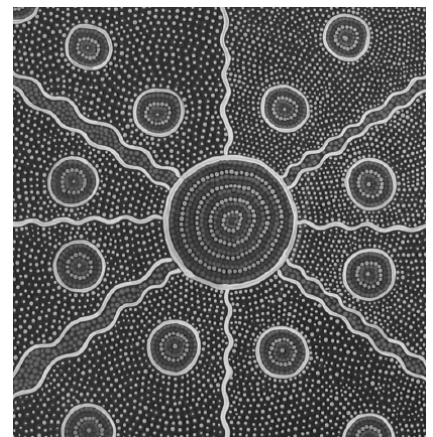
## STRUCTURAL REFORMS RESHAPING TEACHER EDUCATION

In many countries around the world, significant structural reforms are reshaping the landscape of teacher education. For example, in Australia, the recent introduction of a national accreditation system for initial teacher education programmes aims to standardise 'program development, program delivery and program outcomes' and thus to 'quality-assure' the preparation of 'classroom ready teachers' (AITSL 2015: 6). Under this

system, teacher education institutions are required to provide detailed evidence of how their individual courses are meeting the specified (37) standards for graduate teachers, with institutions held accountable according to 'a rigorous and nationally consistent accreditation process' (AITSL 2015: 1). The development and implementation of teaching standards that specify what teachers are supposed to know and be able to do have become an increasingly important component of teaching and teacher education internationally, and bring significant implications for the work of teacher educators and to the field of teacher education. It

has been argued that such initiatives have 'swept away... conceptions of professionals' autonomy and control over their work-related remits and roles' (Evans 2008:24) because the delineation of the profession, and who is designated as a professional, comes from elsewhere, that is, the research community, policy-makers or professional associations (depending on the authorship of the standards).

Within such a standards-based environment, teacher educators (TEs) are positioned as technicians, delivering externally prescribed outcomes and kept accountable to these outcomes through externally



imposed assessment measures. Consequently, TEs' knowledge becomes increasingly de-professionalised, standardised and deprivatised. As Green, Reid & Brennan (2017: 39) highlight of the Australian context, 'Abstracted, reified, denatured and increasingly devalued in policy, teacher education is indeed struggling to thrive as an intellectual and practical endeavour in a policy context that increasingly seeks to render it as an instrumental field.'

### PROFESSIONAL KNOWLEDGE LANDSCAPES

One way of viewing these changing conceptions of teaching and TEs' work is through the concept of professional knowledge landscapes (PKLs) (Clandinin & Connelly 1995,1996). Clandinin and Connelly use the evocative metaphor of a landscape to make explicit the multiple, contradictory and dilemma-ridden contexts in which teachers undertake their work. While the concept of PKLs has been applied extensively in teacher research, the concept is equally powerful for framing the complex nature of TE professional knowledge. These authors distinguish between 'two fundamentally different places on the landscape: the one behind the classroom door with students and the other in professional places with others' (1996: 25). As they traverse the boundaries of these different places on the landscape, TEs learn to live, tell, retell and relive different stories of their professional knowledge. In the perceived safety of their classrooms or other private places, TEs live and share their 'secret lived stories' of practice (Clandinin & Connelly 1996: 25). These 'secret lived stories' represent ways of understanding TE knowledge as situated, tentative and involving situations of uncertain professional judgment. A 'secret stories' view of knowledge is consistent with conceptions of the TE as reflective practitioner (Schön 1983) and of teaching as inherently complex and problematic. The broader, working

institutional landscape, however, is 'littered with imposed prescriptions' (Clandinin & Connelly 1996: 25) about teaching. These prescriptions represent the 'sacred stories', the official stories of TE professional knowledge espoused in public policy and theory. Sacred stories typically represent a technical-rational view of knowledge delivered through research-based theory and technique. Sacred stories are produced for teachers and 'funneled down' to teachers from a range of seemingly indisputable external authorities, including '[r]esearchers, policy makers, [and] senior administrators' (ibid.). Often appearing as unproblematic in their presentation and perspective on quality, sacred stories seep into the landscape and the everyday work of TEs, often to the point where educators themselves become complicit in their unquestioning perpetuation.

Understanding a standards-based approach to teacher education in terms of its sacred story qualities reveals a particular vision of teaching as a technician endeavour and of teacher knowledge, and by implication TE knowledge, defined in terms of certainty, control and adherence to external authority. Relatedly, the significance attached to teacher standards 'seems to imply that there is one "right way" to teach' (Schuck & Buchanan 2012: 2) and while teacher education research warns us there is no recipe book for teaching, still the discourse of standards evokes the notion of general, context-free knowledge and skills that can be transferred from one situation to the next. Within these increasingly 'scripted horizons' (Clandinin 1995), opportunities for the expression of teacher educators' own professional knowledge carried through their 'secret lived stories' of practice are being progressively squeezed out of the educational landscape.

Viewing ourselves as living within a PKL creates opportunities to re-examine and reinterpret our lived stories as teacher educators. For example, understanding the work of TEs as located within a

landscape that is increasingly dominated by particular kinds of sacred stories sets up a challenge for TEs to recognise how these sacred stories actually frame their work. An associated challenge is for TEs to name, value and share their own secret lived stories of practice. Through this process of coming to understand one's own positioning and actions within a particular landscape, the professional know-how of TEs can be articulated, developed and valued, and opportunities created for reshaping the landscape.

### RESHAPING THE LANDSCAPE: THE SELF-STUDY OF TEACHER EDUCATION PRACTICES

Forms of practitioner research, such as self-study of teacher education practices (SSTEP), offer valuable approaches to investigating and communicating TEs' secret lived stories. Self-study formally emerged as a field of research in the early 1990s from the efforts of TEs who were openly questioning the relationship between their approaches to teaching and their students' learning about teaching (Hamilton & Pinnegar 1998). They sought to bring greater attention and value to the role of TE as a knowledge-maker and to take control of their professional activity and professional status as TEs through researching and publishing about their own educational practices. They documented the complex nature of their work, including challenging the various assumptions and expectations of teacher education and its practices (see Loughran 2004). Hence self-study, as a form of insider research, evolved as a means to pay careful attention to and value TEs' knowledge as it is understood and lived within the immediate context of practice and within the wider educational, organisational and structural contexts of their work.

Just as Clandinin and Connelly's secret stories assign value to teachers' individual, lived knowledge of practice, so too does

self-study assume that TE professional knowledge is developed by TEs themselves through the enactment of practice, as opposed to normative (sacred story) definitions of what should happen in that practice. This view does not grow out of a hierarchical privileging of practitioner knowledge *per se*. Rather, it reflects a particular stance towards TE professional knowledge-making in which improvement must be concerned with what is 'good for these students in this moment', as opposed to what is technically proficient (Berry & Forgasz, *in press*).

A self-study stance situates the researcher as an inquirer who questions practice, is willing to look into that which is uncomfortable, feels a responsibility to persist with investigations in the face of vulnerability and feels a sense of openness, willingness and responsibility to make findings public even when these may contradict the received wisdom of sacred stories. Hence, the main purpose of self-study is not in solving problems or creating solutions but in clarifying, extending understanding or further questioning what can be known. Self-study as a form of narrative enquiry continually opens up new storylines to pursue and new issues to address.

However, unlike Clandinin and Connelly's secret stories that remain within the private spaces that teachers inhabit, self-study requires the public sharing of study outcomes in order to make them 'informative for others and available for critical debate' (Vanassche & Kelchtermans 2015: 509). Through making secret story knowledge public via self-study, the insights and understandings that are developed can be challenged, extended, transformed and translated by others (Berry & Forgasz, *in press*). At the same time, an important challenge is to communicate what is learned in ways that capture and hold on to the nature of the knowledge as uncertain, ambiguous, complex and changing. For example, Berry's (2008) longitudinal study of her practice as a

biology TE led to the conceptualisation of a set of interconnected tensions of practice that she found to influence the teaching–learning relationship. From an initial search for answers to her practical problems, Berry came to recognise practice as fundamentally problematic and tensions as an essential component of learning about teaching to interpret and manage the problematic. Hence, Berry's scholarly study of her practice captures the tentative secret story qualities of her TE knowledge. Making this private knowledge public through dissemination within the academic and teacher education communities provides opportunities for other TEs to use, build upon and critique this framework, and to produce new viable stories that can begin to challenge the sacred stories and to re-contour the professional knowledge landscape. As Garvis & Dwyer (2012) noted, '[c]hallenging the status quo also allows the grand narrative of teacher education to be sufficiently displaced, with room created for alternative stories beyond cover stories that conform to the status quo' (p. 5). In enacting self-study as a form of positive resistance to sacred stories of TE knowledge, TEs take up a scholarly position designed to empower themselves as knowledge-makers about teacher education.

## CONCLUSION: A CHALLENGE AND A PROMISE

Paradoxically, at a time when the importance of TEs as a specific professional group with distinct expertise, responsibilities and commitments is being increasingly recognised and promoted in policy and scholarly discussions (European Commission 2013; Kelchtermans, Smith & Vanderlinde 2018), structural reforms to teacher education that press for compliance and the standardisation of teaching are arguably reducing TEs' role to little more than service providers. The task of TEs themselves in actively working to articulate, strengthen and value their professional knowledge is vital. Teacher

education cannot and should not be understood as the technical application of knowledge to practice (a sacred story view of practice), but that practice necessarily requires improvisation, tact and judgment enacted within a specific context (a secret story view of practice).

The notion of the professional knowledge landscape (Clandinin & Connelly 1995, 1996) offers one way of interpreting this situation. With the ubiquitous spread of sacred stories on the teacher education PKL, and the impending sense that TEs' secret stories are being squeezed out of the landscape altogether, TEs need to recognise, act upon and establish the importance of the secret story as embodying a particular kind of TE knowledge. Self-study research, as a form of secret-story telling, values the contextualised, enacted and contingent nature of TE professional knowledge; as a methodology, enables TEs to discover, develop and refine their personal knowledge of practice; and as serious scholarship can offer powerful counterpoints to the instrumentalist–technicist discourses about teacher education that dominate current policy and practice. In other words, while self-study provides a means to know and articulate TEs' secret story knowledge, it also compels us not to keep our stories secret, but to tell them, and to tell them in ways that position TEs and their students as active and legitimate knowledge-makers. ■

## May 2021 Postscript

In my contribution to *Research in Teacher Education* (May 2018), I drew attention to the ways in which the current accountability-led, standards-based teacher education policy environment de-professionalises teacher educators and reduces their work to little more than service delivery, with few opportunities to exercise autonomy or professional judgment. I called upon teacher educators to resist these external forces and to engage in positive ‘acts of resistance’ by recognizing, developing and valuing their own voices through knowledge-making processes such as self-study. Since the publication of this commentary, I have continued to pursue the idea of ‘positive resistance’ as an important means by which teacher educators can talk back to the current managerialist agenda and constructively express their professional commitment and care. Together with colleagues Rachel Forgasz (Monash) and Geert Kelchtermans (Leuven) we have been pursuing the notion of “principled

resistance”, building on Achinstein and Ogawa’s (2006) work. Principled resistance takes up the idea that being a committed professional is not just technical, but requires reading and responding to power in one’s own environment. While structural conditions may shape and re-define teacher educators’ work, they do not completely eradicate the individual teacher educator’s agency, including their capacity to interpret and make sense of situations, make judgements, decide on options for action, and eventually enact them in their professional practice. Resistance and caring action can function as the manifestation of commitment, that allow for a balance between the requirements of the institutional logics in policy, the organizational agendas and concerns of workplaces, as well as the sense of responsibility and moral position of individual professionals. ■

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