EDITORIAL

The Teaching Council and Initial Teacher Education: False Binaries and Academic Freedom

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The Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter, the Council) is the professional body responsible for regulating teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand. Established by the Education and Training Act 2020, its purpose is "to ensure safe and high-quality leadership, teaching, and learning for children and young people in early childhood, primary, secondary, and senior secondary schooling in English-medium and Māori-medium settings through raising the status of the profession" (s.478). One aspect of the Council's work is to accredit Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers' programmes in order to ensure ITE graduates are suitable, and suitably prepared, for the demanding and complex role of being a teacher. This interaction between the Council and ITE involves a delicate balancing act between the professional expectations of a regulatory body, and the academic freedom of ITE providers.

Moreover, the situation is complicated by the relationship of the Council to both teachers and the government. Despite the attempt to position the Council as a professional body, arising from the industry, it was imposed upon teachers, and its primary function, politically speaking, is to achieve the educational/political aims of government, which may or may not be based upon research, and is more likely, over time, to be linked to political sensitivities.

Here we critically examine the Council's February, 2022 report, entitled *Creating an equitable future-focused Initial Teacher Education (ITE) system: The new ITE requirements – the journey so far*. There is an underlying tension between ITE as a university education and ITE as a professional qualification. We place to one side the assumption that a regulatory body should drive the construction of an equitable and future-focused degree programme, and outline two significant concerns the Council's report indicates: the reification of a false binary between theory and practice; and the Council's explicit intention to determine the content, pedagogy, and assessment of tertiary programmes.

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At the heart of the Council's report sits an assumption that theory and practice are distinctive and separable. Dedicating an early section of the report to set out a 'theory/practice divide', the Council asserts that an "ongoing debate within the design and delivery of ITE programmes is how best to provide student teachers with the right balance between theory or academic knowledge and the practical application of teaching skills" (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022, p. 7). This assertion is built upon an issue the Council had previously identified, in which there was a "perception that ITE [has] become increasingly academic and newly graduated teachers lack practical skills" (2022, p. 13). For the Council, this poses a risk.

> The risk of an imbalance between theory and practice is that ITE providers are disconnected from the profession, which would lead to student teachers getting too much academic knowledge without the practical capability to teach. (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022, p. 7)

This construction of a theory/practice binary performs a significant function within the Council's ITE requirements. As the report indicates, the requirement for ITE providers to develop 'authentic partnerships' is explicitly intended to ensure that ITE programmes "avoid the 'theory/practice divide'" (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022, p. 28).

What the Council calls a 'theory/practice divide' is a false binary. All educational practice is imbued with theory (Abbiss, 2019). Should a teacher kneel down and speak to a 4-year-old at eye level? Should Year 3 students be grouped by ability? Should teachers' planning for Year 12 Biology solely prepare students for the assessment? Decisions made by teachers every day, at every level of the education sector, are informed by their theoretical frameworks. It has long been accepted within education that a teacher's theoretical frameworks are operating, whether or not the teacher is aware of them (Biesta, 2013). From a recognition of the entangled nature of theory and practice arises the concept of 'praxis' which, simply put, means 'theory-informed practice'. Praxis, and the need to change thinking in order to change practice, has been championed by many seekers of social justice, including Paolo Friere (Dale, 2010).

An explicit push by the Council for more 'practice over theory' within ITE presents its own risks. By treating theory as unimportant, we are left with an impoverished workforce, able only to copy practices they see modelled, and unable to identify, critique, or alter the philosophical and ideological bases in which those practices are grounded. No practice is ideologically neutral (Sum & Jessop, 2013). And as critical theorists remind us, teaching is always a political act (Freire, 2000). An attempt to strip theory from a teacher's practical work reduces the position of the teacher from an intellectual and a critically thinking practitioner within a knowledge democracy to an uncritical technician (Benade, 2012). In such a scenario, with a teaching force unable to engage in theoretical critique, the hope that our country's children and young people will be introduced to the foundations of critical citizenship also fades. Such an outcome cannot 'raise the status of the profession'. The solution isn't to argue for *more* theory, or *more* practice, but rather to continually seek out ways in which each informs the other.

The Council's construction of this false binary is concerning. The way in which the Council puts this binary to work challenges the rights of academic freedom of ITE providers. The Education and Training Act 2020 details academic freedom as including (among other aspects):

c)   the freedom of the institution and its staff to regulate the subject matter of courses taught at the institution:

d)   the freedom of the institution and its staff to teach and assess students in the manner that they consider best promotes learning (s. 267(4)).

In order to 'avoid' the Council's 'theory/practice' binary, ITE providers are required to include various aspects in their programmes to be accredited. The Council requires the lengthening of professional placements, and for ITE providers to introduce Key Teaching Tasks and a Culminating Integrative Assessment into their programmes. Culminating Integrative Assessments "*must* contain opportunities to draw on an authentic practice situation and *must* be assessed primarily orally" (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022, p. 34, emphasis added). In addition, ITE providers are expected to demonstrate 'authentic partnerships' with a range of education stakeholders, and include these groups in the development and delivery of programme content and assessment. For instance, the development of Key Teaching Tasks "is done in collaboration with the ITE providers' partners" (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022, p. 33). When evaluating ITE programmes for approval, "the Council would *expect to see partners having input into the design of assessments* within the programme…[and] expect that local iwi be meaningfully involved in programme design and *to see evidence of this in programme development and design and delivery*" (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022, p. 28, emphasis added). These requirements see the Council reach out of its position as a regulatory, standard-setting body, and into the content, delivery, and assessment of tertiary programmes.

If the Council's ITE requirements are not met by ITE providers, it will not accredit a provider's programme until 'conditions' are met. There were 71 conditions issued during programme certification throughout Aotearoa New Zealand between 2019 and July 2021. Over half of the conditions issued by the Council to ITE providers related to three key areas, and directly required different design, content, and assessment structures from ITE institutions. The largest number of conditions, 23, were based on providers' failure to adequately meet requirements related to programme "Design and delivery based on authentic partnerships" (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2022, p. 17). The next largest number of conditions, 10, related to the way that ITE providers had developed the Culminating Integrative Assessment, and 6 conditions related to the requirements of the Key Teaching Tasks.

Increasingly, tertiary institutions are sites of contested demands from professional sectors/business, academics, and institution managers (Shore & Taitz, 2012). The relationship between the Council and ITE providers, as evidenced by the Council's 2022 report, indicates that the possibility for this contestation is particularly pronounced within ITE. And yet it is exceedingly difficult for ITE providers to push back

against Council incursions into programme design, assessment, and delivery. The two issues we raise are inextricably connected. If the organisation coercing assessment structures, pedagogies, and content into ITE courses believes in a theory/practice binary, and believes that it creates problems (as the Council's report indicates), the result is one where our national ITE providers are required to cede academic autonomy, defying the Act, and accelerating an erosion of theoretical understandings of teaching in the process.

How can we find meaningful and constructive ways forward? There are three steps that come to mind. First, since much of the justification for the Council's incursions into academic programmes is built upon their uncritical acceptance of the existence of a theory/practice divide, more work should be undertaken by the Council to examine this view. Indeed, the literature review, which the Council commissioned in readiness for developing the ITE Requirements, clearly indicates that "[n]otions of a theory-practice divide are unhelpful" (Whatman and McDonald, 2017, p. 35). Second, the Council's report emphasises authentic partnerships between ITE providers and partners, but fails to apply the same yardstick to their own engagement with ITE providers. While consultation with ITE providers is evident through some meetings during the development of the Council's ITE Requirements, the resulting approach in which an assessment model was developed at one university, and is now required for all ITE providers, is highly problematic. Authentic partnerships between the Council and ITE providers should never mean that all programmes look, feel, talk, and walk the same. Finally, ITE leaders must be circumspect in accepting programme requirements which lead to erosion of academic freedom, and should be confident that in pushing back against the Council they are not putting programme certification at risk. This is, of course, an important principle underpinning authentic partnerships.

Rather than a theory/practice divide, it appears that we find ourselves within a regulation/education divide. As a regulatory body setting professional standards, the Council must ensure that it avoids mission creep into the halls of ITE providers. Such work is the purview of the institutions which house ITE programmes, whose freedoms to determine the design, delivery, and assessment of their programmes are clearly protected by the very Act that establishes the Council as a regulatory body. The consequences of regulatory overreach are dire, and a justification built upon false binaries between theory and practice is a failing strategy.

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