

# *Questions of Purpose in Teacher Education Research*

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## **Introduction**

In my short opening comments I would like to give some consideration to what could be called ‘questions of purpose in teacher education research’ in order to make the case for the relevance of those questions of purpose for our work here at the conference as an overarching theme, crossing the six working group themes.

There are two types of purpose questions in connection with teacher education research, both distinguished by the subject of the purpose. In the first case the focus is on the purpose of teacher education *research*, and the question is “What is the purpose of teacher education research?” In the second case the focus is on the purpose of *teacher education* and the question here is “How does the purpose of teacher education impact *research* on teacher education?” Here I will only speak on the latter case, namely the role that the purpose of teacher education can, should, and does play in *researching* teacher education.

## **The Role of the Purpose of Teacher Education in Research**

When Linda Darling-Hammond and her collaborators recently published a framework for preparing teachers for a changing world<sup>1</sup>, it was *a vision of professional teaching practice* that was at the centre of that framework. The current teacher education program at the University of Calgary as described by Anne Phelan (2005) is “inquiry-based, learner-focused and field-oriented” (p. 58) in order to “prepare teachers that can dwell within the rough ground of experience, appreciate its complexity and deep interpretability, and respond ethically. Put simply, the program attempts to develop the capacity for discernment” (p. 62). These are two examples illustrating the role of purpose in teacher education: it is the purpose of teacher education that frames program design and, hence, teacher education pedagogy.<sup>2</sup>

Thinking about teacher education outside of program design issues is also framed by questions of purpose, for instance in the discussion about teacher education and social justice. In their introduction to their edited book *Teacher Education for Democracy and Social Justice*, Michelli and Keiser (2005) suggest that a common vision for teacher education should be connected to “four historical purposes of public education”, of which one is “preparing students to be active, involved participants in democracy” (p. xviii).

At a theoretical level the idea seems to provide itself that our thinking about teacher education is guided by a vision of the qualities we want to see in our graduates and their teaching practice so that they can have the impact we hope they have on student learning and

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<sup>1</sup> Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005, p. 11; Darling-Hammond, 2006a, p. 84; Darling-Hammond, 2006b.

<sup>2</sup> Other examples can be drawn from Goodlad (1990), Grimmett (1998), Liston and Zeichner (1991) and many others.

student development – teacher education is ultimately *preparation*, and the purpose of teacher education provides the answer to the question “Preparation for what?”

What might seem to present itself less direct is, I think, the question of the role of the purpose of teacher education for *researching* teacher education, especially *more empirical* research. This is the question I want to discuss for the rest of the talk.

You might be familiar with the Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005), edited by the panel’s two co-chairs, Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Kenneth Zeichner. At the core the panel report is a meta-analysis of peer-reviewed empirical research on teacher education in the USA. The report analyses empirical research studies clustered into eight categories, depending on the aspect of teacher education they are inquiring into: the studies considered inquire into teachers’ characteristics, subject matter and foundational course work, methods courses and field experiences, pedagogical approaches, preparation for teaching a diverse population, preparation for teaching students with disabilities, the accountability process, and teacher education programs. The majority of the research studies considered in each of the eight categories is what could be called *impact* or *effect research* on teacher education, meaning that those studies investigate the impact or the effect that certain factors of teacher education have. (Not all teacher education research is impact or effect research in this sense. For instance, researching the demographics of those entering teacher education programs is not by necessity impact research in the sense used here. However, even this kind of research on teacher education is linked to the impact question in an indirect way as I will argue below.)

All impact or effect research implies the question – as Fred Korthagen (2001, p. 89) phrases it – “Effective toward what end?” It is here where the purpose of teacher education comes into play for empirical research on teacher education. Let me illustrate this point by drawing on one particular example of teacher education program research, namely on Korthagen’s (2001) presentation of research into a programmatic teacher education approach he himself promotes and calls Realistic Teacher Education, an approach he suggests to overcome the practice and theory divide in many teacher education programs. At the core of this approach are three principles for a Realistic Teacher Education pedagogy (Korthagen, 2001, p. 72), all three of which are either directly or indirectly linked to the idea of helping teacher candidates become reflective practitioners. In chapter 6 of his book Korthagen discusses empirical research into the effects of the Realistic Teacher Education pedagogy in particular and into programs and strategies that promote reflection in general. There he discusses what he calls “the problem of operationalizing reflection” (p. 91). He writes:

One issue on which these differ [that is the operationalizations of reflection] is the question of what educational aspects are worthy of reflection. . . . This question is directly related to the question of what constitutes good teaching.  
(Korthagen, 2001, p. 91)

The Korthagen example illustrates several aspects of *the role* of the purpose of teacher education in *researching* teacher education. It illustrates how impact or effect research draws its answer to the question ‘Effective toward what end?’ from assumptions about the purpose of teacher education. In Korthagen’s example, the impact research he is interested in assesses the impact the Realistic Teacher Education program has on teacher candidates’ ability for

reflective teaching practice, which is a central purpose of the Realistic Teacher Education program.

The Korthagen example helps also illustrating a distinction between what could be called program-based assumptions and research-based assumptions about the purpose of teacher education. What I just discussed was an explicit program-based assumption about the purpose of teacher education, namely to help teacher candidates develop into reflective teaching practitioners. As Korthagen's "problem of operationalizing reflection" suggests, some programs might not explicitly articulate an answer to this problem. For research into the effect of the program this can mean that the research inquires first into the unarticulated assumptions about the program's purpose by, for instance, interviewing those working within the program. Korthagen has used this research approach when researching the effectiveness of Realistic Teacher Education (Korthagen, 2001, pp. 93-95).

Case study research into exemplary teacher education programs illustrates the other case: research-based assumptions about the purpose of teacher education. As the case study publications by Howey and Zimpher (1989) and Darling-Hammond (2006) illustrate, in exemplary case study research on teacher education programs exemplary programs are first chosen and then studied for their common features to inquiry into program features that seem to have an impact on the desired output by the exemplary programs. In contrast to the Korthagen example, here the purpose of teacher education used to assess the impact of the programs is set externally to the programs by the researchers in order to establish the exemplarity of the chosen programs (see Howey & Zimpher, 1989, p. 6; Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 16). In other words, the purpose of teacher education is not program-based but rather research-based.

Another example of research-based purpose thinking is the demographic research I mentioned above. When we inquire into the gender, age, cultural background, and so on of those entering our teacher education programs, we do so because we are concerned with the impact those factors have on the teaching and learning in classrooms. We are interested in the social, cultural and ethnic background of teacher candidates because we might be concerned about the impact that a homogeneous, monolingual, white, middle class teaching force has on a socially, culturally and linguistically diverse student population. This impact – and this is the crucial point here – might not be compatible with the purpose of school education as we see it, which is why we inquire into demographic aspects of our teacher candidates. We would not be interested in researching the shoe size of teacher candidates because we are not concerned about its impact on students. This means that even in demographic research we are concerned with purpose questions *because* we are concerned with impact that might not be compatible with a specific vision of educational purpose.

For this example of demographic research in teacher education I have drawn upon the purpose of institutionalized education or schooling, less so on the purpose of *teacher education*. But in my view both are closely linked, although not identical or equivalent. It seems to me that implicitly or explicitly given purposes of teacher education programs fall into three categories. First, those programs that focus their purpose on helping teacher candidates develop competency in engaging in particular teaching practices. The work by Darling-Hammond and her collaborators referred to above can be seen as a prototypical example for this case. Second, they can focus their purpose on developing particular human qualities in teacher candidates. The purpose of the Calgary teacher education program might be taken as a

prototypical example in this case. And, finally, the programs can focus their purpose on the purpose of schooling.

As suggested, all three responses to the purpose question for teacher education are linked. It is particular knowledge, skills and attitudes (to use the Alberta Learning standards framework) that teachers have to have in order to engage in the professional teaching practice that Darling-Hammond envisions, and the idea of developing discernment and practical wisdom in teacher candidates in the Calgary program will be directly linked to a vision of what it means to engage adequately in the lives of schools. And ultimately, all those visions are linked to a view of what schooling is to be about for which teacher candidates in these programs are to be prepared.

However, if we talk about the *focus* of a program, we need to acknowledge differences in focus of purpose. Those differences can be seen when asking the question how those different program foci impact on *researching* teacher education. In his chapter *A Research Agenda for Teacher Education* in the AERA Report I mentioned above, Kenneth Zeichner (2005) writes:

One critical outcome that has been largely neglected in the teacher education research literature is *student learning*. . . . We think that greater efforts need to be made by researchers to connect teacher education to student learning. In doing so, researchers need to explore measures of other aspects of academic student learning in addition to that which is assessed in standardized achievement tests. . . . Researchers should address these other aspects of student learning such as students' social, emotional, aesthetic, and civic development. We need broader conceptions of how to measure student competence or success.

(Zeichner, 2005, p. 743; emphasis in original)

Researching the impact of teacher education programs on pupils' competency and success – as Zeichner suggests – cannot be a behaviouristic 'black box'-type of research, where one only looks at program qualities and then assesses student learning in classes with graduates of those programs. There are so many factors influencing students' learning success beside what the teacher contributes<sup>3</sup> that we want to know what teacher qualities and teacher practices contribute to student success. That means researching the impact of a teacher education program on student learning *will have to include* researching the impact of the program on teacher candidates' human qualities and the practices they engage in. On the other hand, researching the impact of a teacher education program on teacher candidates' teaching practices *does not* require the consideration of student learning in the research – which is exactly the point Zeichner raises.

For purposes of teacher education programs this means that when the program focuses on developing teacher candidates' ability and inclination to engage in particular teaching practices, the program might, if at all, make the *assumption* that this practice makes student learning of a particular type more likely.

The role of the purpose question in researching teacher education, I argued, is – simplified – to provide an answer to the question what impact we are interested in. The last

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<sup>3</sup> This is a point made by Cochran-Smith (2005, pp. 414-415) against a misconceptualized focus on outcomes in teacher education research.

point just raised, then, suggests that in researching teacher education, researchers should consider the ‘ultimate’ purpose of teacher education, namely to have a desired impact on student learning. This affects impact research regardless of whether the purpose is program-based – given explicitly or implicitly – or where the purpose is research-based and, thus, brought by the researchers to the inquiry into the impact of a particular version of teacher education.

I now like to conclude with one big suggestion for our work tomorrow with a couple of smaller attachments derived from what I said previously.

## Conclusion

I suggest that regardless which research theme of teacher education we are inquiring into, we need to be explicit about our own and – where applicable – the programs’ assumptions about the purpose of teacher education. This suggestion fits into the more general recommendation by others to consider larger theoretical frameworks and assumptions in research on teacher education. For instance, Fred Korthagen writes:

Perhaps the biggest problem with evaluative research in this field is that such underlying philosophies of education are seldom made explicit, which makes any claim about effects of promoting reflection questionable or at least unclear. What is needed are coherent theories in which the relation between effects of the promotion of reflection and views of good teaching are made explicit.  
(Korthagen, 2001, p. 91)

Kenneth Zeichner writes:

Another aspect of design that we think is important for future research is to better *situate research studies in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks*. Failure to do this will result in continued difficulties in explaining findings about the effects or lack of effects of particular teacher education practices.  
(Zeichner, 2005, p. 741)

If you are familiar with Brent Davis and Denis Sumara’s work on complexity theory and educational research (David & Sumara, 2006), you might appreciate these recommendations for including ‘a larger picture’ – and I also hope, for including the purpose question – into our researching teacher education.

My discussion about the purpose of teacher education would then add the following five ideas to considering the purpose question in teacher education research.

1. It is the purpose of teacher education that provides the standards against which impact research into teacher education is assessed.
2. The purpose of teacher education is relevant even in teacher education research that is not focused on program impact, because teacher education is *preparation*, and the purpose question provides a central component to the answer what that preparation is for.

3. Assumptions about the purpose of teacher education can be program-based – meaning that the teacher education program inquired into provides the purpose of the program – or the assumptions can be research-based – meaning that the researchers bring their vision of the purpose of teacher education to their inquiry into teacher education.
4. When considering the purpose of teacher education in researching teacher education, the ‘ultimate’ purpose of teacher education should be kept in focus: impacting student learning and development in a desired way.
5. The purpose of teacher education should provide one of a series of underlying and guiding assumptions in a larger theoretical framework that needs to be explicitly in focus when doing research in teacher education.

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