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ABSTRACT

Neoliberal critiques of university-based teacher education programmes have led to policy changes such as the rise of alternative certification programmes, bringing in to question the role of the university in teacher education. Concomitantly, such changes probematise the place of knowledge and evidence in in teacher education. This issue is of particular importance given extant debates about the place of propositional knowledge about children with special educational needs in inclusive education. This paper explores these debates in terms of recent international trends in policy and practice in teacher education for inclusion and argues for an explicit role for universities as custodians and curators of propositional knowledge in pre and in service teacher education.

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Introduction

Neo-liberal policy approaches to teaching and teacher education across a range of territories, particularly in the last fifteen years, have resulted in policy shifts such as the development of alternative routes to certification involving greater school-based provision (Clarke and Phelan 2017; Grossman and Loeb 2021; Mayer 2014; Moon 2016; Zeichner, Payne, and Brayko 2015). This has increasingly called in to question the place of universities in teacher education, and highlighted the issue of what expertise it is that universities bring to the table, and in what ways they work with and enhance, or not, the role of schools in teacher education. This issue is particularly pertinent for the preparation of teachers to effectively include children with special educational needs (SEN) in the classroom, due to extant debates about the place of theoretical and practical knowledge in relation to both effective inclusion in general and teacher education for inclusion in particular (Florian and Spratt 2013; Mintz 2019, 2020, 2015; Norwich 2013).

There has also been longstanding debate about the role of universities in early teacher development after the pre-service phase. The perceived failures of initiatives which have aimed to engage novice teachers in ongoing professional learning and development informed by academic expertise have introduced considerable uncertainty as to the

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place of universities in teacher education in the first three years of teaching (Emstad and Sandvik 2020; Green, Tindall-Ford, and Eady 2020; Jaquith et al. 2010; Straub and Ehmke 2021). Such concerns can be traced back to anxieties about the success of the Professional Development School model in the US in 1990s (Zeichner, Payne, and Brayko 2015). Nevertheless, arguments continue to be made that universities do have such a place, due to (a) their understanding of the particular contexts and needs of local schools derived from pre-service university-school partnerships (Smith 2007; Zeichner 2017), (b) the extant relationships university staff and novice teachers and their knowledge of their strengths and areas for development (Bastian and Marks 2017) and (c) the role of universities as mobilisers of knowledge related to evidence based practice (Nevins Stanulis and Floden 2009; Windsor et al. 2020). There has been, though, relatively little attention paid in the recent academic literature on policy and practice development to the specific role that universities can and should play in teacher education. Much more attention has been given, however, to the potential role of universities in mediating the development of evidence-informed practice in schools more widely. A number of initiatives have involved schools using collaborative models within and between schools to foster engagement with research evidence. These include research school networks in England (Dixon, Brookes, and Siddle 2020), professional learning community models focused on research evidence engagement in India (Zahedi et al. 2021), and knowledge networks in Canada (Cooper, Klinger, and McAdie 2017). Such studies indicate a potential role for universities in facilitating access to and engagement with research. Several other studies, for example, (Brown and Poortman 2018; Greany and Maxwell 2017) have also noted the challenges, particularly time pressures, on achieving effective evidence-informed practice in schools and the role that universities can play in facilitating such access, particularly in terms of effective filtering and curating of the evidence base. There has also been some limited attention to the specific use of such networks for developing teacher engagement with research related to special educational needs and inclusion (Mintz et al. 2021).

There have also been regular calls over the last two decades (Darling-Hammond et al. 2017, 2011; Feiman-Nemser 2001) for closer integration between pre- and in-service teacher education, particularly in the first three years of teaching, such calls being predicated on an assumption that universities have a role to play in both phases. However, the question of what that role can and should be, at pre-service and in-service phases, remains somewhat contested. This is particularly the case with regards to extant debates on the place of knowledge in teacher practice and teacher education.

The role of universities and knowledge in teacher education and teacher education for inclusion

The critiques of neoliberal approaches to teacher education involving the shift from university to schools as the primary locus for teacher education have voiced considerable opposition to this putative downgrading of the role of the university (Connell 2009; Ellis and Spendlove 2020; McIntyre, Youens, and Stevenson 2019). However, the concern raised in much of this literature is, not surprisingly, about the role of the university in maintaining a focus on sociological critiques of existing practice in schools and the neoliberal agenda itself, not on the knowledge base that universities might bring to

teacher education. This of course reflects the long-standing debate, rooted in conflicts in the study of the sociology of knowledge, about how knowledge is related to practice in the work of professionals. Concomitantly, the debate about the place of knowledge in teacher practice and teacher education is also longstanding (Timperley and Alton-Lee 2008). The Hirst/Carr debate between Paul Hirst and Wilfred Carr on how to conceptualise knowledge in the context of the practice of education – see Hirst and Carr (2005) – is a well-known example. Carr (2004) argues firstly that it is only an (Aristotelian) practical philosophy of knowledge that acknowledges the socially constructed, contextual and contingent form of knowledge. Secondly, Carr argues that practice and knowledge in pursuits such as education are intertwined. Finally, Carr argues that knowledge is in fact better considered as what arises from our reflection whilst engaged in those practices as to what the ‘good life’ is, which arises from our natural wisdom, and is not something easily specified in theory or systems of propositional knowledge and in fact to attempt such is to misunderstand what such knowledge is epistemologically. In contrast to this critical perspective, Hirst, in Hirst and Carr (2005) argues that it is true that such knowledge has history and arises from reflection on practice and the engagement with practice and as well is valued laden in that it as Aristotle says is focused on seeking wisdom. Nevertheless, Hirst proposes, this does not mean that we cannot as well conceive of theoretical and propositional knowledge that has an influence on practice or that codifies elements (if not the totality) of that practice and thus is a tool for reflection on and development of such practice.

This debate on the nature of knowledge in education can be seen in various guises across the decades, with what Rata (2012) characterises as ‘social knowledge’ being argued for by theorists such as Bernstein (1975), Kemmis (2005) and Biesta (2007). Others such as Nash (2001), Young (2008) and Moore (2013) have argued for a notion of propositional knowledge separate in some way from the practice in which it is applied.

Michael Young explicitly noted the importance of the university as a repository of expert knowledge, important in its own right, as part of the overall package for teacher education (Young 1998). Young’s focus, as in his later, widely cited, application of the ‘knowledge turn’ to the school curriculum (Young 2008), derived from Durkheim’s social realism (Durkheim and Suicide 1952), is on propositional knowledge resulting from the scientific investigation in its wider sense, such as evidence about the effectiveness of particular educational interventions. Young (2008) argues, similarly to Carr, that if we are said to be able to engage consciously in professional decision-making, then there must be a body of propositional knowledge that is determinate and, in some way, independently anchored separately from practice.

Drawing on Young, Rata (2012, 2019) points out that the danger of critical perspectives on knowledge is that they can imply that there is in fact no such body of knowledge. Rata crucially then notes that this runs the risk of denying the benefits of knowledge derived from the rational thinking of the Enlightenment, embodied in the empirical scientific work of the university, to socially disadvantaged or marginalised groups who in fact stand most to benefit from it. In a similar vein, Cochran-Smith (Cochran-Smith 2005, 2017) has argued that from the 1980s there had been too much focus in research on teacher education on construing the knowledge required in teacher education as teacher beliefs (akin somewhat to an Aristotelian practical philosophy) which

had overshadowed other questions, including the place of propositional knowledge and evidence about what works in teacher education and what works in teaching. Similarly, Zeichner (2010, 2017), citing Young (1998), in a typical move in the field, notes his concerns about the dangers of neo-liberal approaches to education whilst essentially ignoring Young's actual view that a range of types of knowledge are central to teacher education.

This issue has been, I contend, particularly acute in the field of inclusion in terms of how best to include children with special educational needs (SEN) in the classroom. For too long, there has been scant attention, in the field of teacher education for inclusion, to the role of propositional knowledge (Mintz et al. 2020, 2015). Little consideration has been given to the role of propositional knowledge related to understanding the particular features of categories of need, and about strategies and approaches in relation to how to most effectively teach children with particular barriers to learning. In terms of teacher education and SEN, I argue that it applies in several ways. Firstly, it includes propositional knowledge that is generated from university research, which could be equated to the evidence underlying evidence-informed practice (Brown 2015, 2017). This could include knowledge about the effectiveness of particular interventions, and encompasses (see, for example, Odom, Hall, and Suhrheinrich [2020] on autism) although is certainly not limited to, evidence 'tied' to diagnostic categories of SEN. Secondly, it refers to propositional 'content' knowledge in SEN. This includes knowledge about typical and atypical child development, and knowledge about particular areas of need or diagnostic categories, that is, an understanding of autism and common educational approaches. It also includes knowledge of theories and debates about how to conceptualise inclusion and SEN, and concepts and strategies in inclusive pedagogy such as the effective use of teaching assistants.

This argument for a place for knowledge in teacher practice and teacher education for inclusion is on the face of it in direct opposition to critical perspectives in the field, such as those of (Florian 2012a, 2012b; Hodkinson 2020; Slee 2018), which have long argued that it is 'social' rather than propositional knowledge that is important if teachers are to successfully include children with diverse needs in the classroom. The emphasis is on 'social knowledge' and knowledge of sociological critiques of cognitivist or developmental perspectives; not on the knowledge of the enlightenment, as a 'good' in itself.

Knowledge in inclusive pedagogy

The place of propositional knowledge in models of inclusive pedagogy is also contested. Florian's (2012a) influential model regards inclusive pedagogy as having a number of interrelated facets: (1) a commitment to avoid the marginalisation potentially arising from labelling of individual children, (2) open-ended views of the children's potential to learn, (3) aiming to extend the range of options open to everyone in the classroom and (4) a shift in thinking towards recognising the need to consider the particular learning needs of all children, rather than considering children with special needs as an add-on after catering for the needs of the 'median' child. In essence, this is a critical perspective in that gives primacy to a conceptualisation of knowledge about the individual child being something that is constructed in the process of engagement between teacher and said child. It is not clear what the place is for a notion of propositional knowledge in Florian's model or other critical perspectives on inclusion.

However, wider models of professional practice in teaching, have noted the importance of a place for propositional knowledge. Timperley's (Timperley, Ell, and Le Fevre 2017, 2008, 2009) influential approach argues that in order to achieve the flexibility and innovation necessary to be an expert, teachers need to develop a large enough knowledge base (i.e. propositional knowledge) that they can draw on in selecting various strategies. In arguing for a connection between knowledge and practice, Timperley draws on Donovan et al.'s (1999) theory of learning which argues that propositional knowledge needs to be integrated into personal conceptual frameworks which allow the individual to make links between that knowledge and their own personal and professional experiences. Timperley (2008, 2009) also contends that integrating such propositional knowledge in this way is key in teachers moving towards 'adaptive expertise'. Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Bransford (2007) define the development of adaptive expertise as moving to a position where one can perform routine tasks without too much attentional resource, as well as moving beyond existing routines to respond flexibly to novel situations. Having enough propositional knowledge is one of the prerequisites for developing confidence in the flexible selection of teaching strategies, with such shifts in flexibility taking place, albeit rarely in a linear fashion, in the first 3–5 years of teaching. Timperley (2008, 2009) sees these shifts in flexibility as crucially involving: (1) moving the focus from themselves as a teacher to the student as a learner, and (2) moving from an understanding of learning as linear and context independent to a position where they appreciate the situated context of learning for the individual student and the need to adapt to the frame of reference of the student. Such an approach does set a clear role for propositional knowledge. Others such as Anthony, Hunter, and Hunter (2015) have also noted the similarities between the approach to thinking about shifts in thinking in this model, and the shift in thinking identified in Florian's (2012a) approach to inclusive pedagogy. One could argue that this highlights an important gap in the latter model, in that it makes no reference at all to the role of propositional knowledge.

There is, at the very least, an argument, that propositional knowledge, including evidence about effective practices and interventions about SEN has a place in teacher education for inclusion. This is particularly the case given the focus of psychology and other 'scientific' disciplines on amassing evidence about interventions for children with SEN (Mintz and Wyse 2015). Taking just one example, Wong et al. (2015)'s review of evidence-based practices in autism identifies significant empirical support for the use of video modelling for developing social communication skills. However, Sweileh et al. (2016)'s bibliometric review of academic articles on autism, alone, indicated many thousands of new papers being published (albeit across all fields of autism research) per year. It is hard to see, practically, how beginning teachers could filter and access such propositional knowledge, nor develop the skills to access it during their careers, without an explicit role for universities in teacher education for inclusion in both pre-service and in-service teacher education. Further, as noted, research on evidence use by schools, such as Brown (2015) and Brown and Poortman (2018) has demonstrated the considerable limitations that teachers and schools have in engaging with research evidence, including propositional knowledge derived from empirical studies, without collaboration and considerable assistance, from the academy. Such arguments, I propose, also have direct application to teacher education, particularly in relation to the effective inclusion

of children with SEN. Specifically, if the argument that propositional knowledge is thought important for teachers to be effective in the inclusion of children with SEN is accepted, then it is reasonable to suggest that they need to gain such knowledge in teacher education programmes. Similarly, if the argument that schools themselves are not equipped to access such knowledge alone is accepted, then it follows that universities have a role in the mobilisation of such knowledge into such programmes.

Perspectives which underplay the role of propositional knowledge

Critical perspectives that underplay the role of propositional knowledge in teacher education are common in both theory and practice. For example, Zeichner has argued (Zeichner 2014, 2016) for the democratisation of teacher education, whereby there is a truly equal partnership between ‘expert teachers’ in schools and the academy in the design and implementation of teacher education programmes. On the face of it, effective partnership working between schools and universities in teacher education is desirable, and as Zeichner identifies, working out how to cross this boundary effectively is one of the perennial issues in getting teacher education to ‘work’. However, Zeichner is not just calling for democratisation in terms of equal recognition of the role played by different actors in school-university partnerships, but also for a democratisation of knowledge. In other words, Zeichner proposes a particular view of social knowledge in which what is known arises from our reflection whilst engaged in practices, rather than anything specifically separable as propositional knowledge. In the context of teacher education for inclusion, I think that there are real risks in such an approach of overly blurring the boundaries in terms of who knows and does not know what. It may be that, contrary to Zeichner’s argument, programmes which still maintain, at least at some level, clearly demarked domains of expertise between universities and teachers, which explicitly recognise the differing expertise types, are more likely to facilitate both the provision of necessary input on propositional knowledge and effective development of teacher capacity to reflect on the relationship between propositional and practical knowledge in their practice. This is not to argue for a devaluing of teacher experiential knowledge nor to underplay the importance of effective cooperation and collaboration across schools and universities. Nor indeed is it to ignore the fact that in reality who knows what can often be messy and that indeed many teachers can have ownership of considerable propositional knowledge about SEN. Rather it is to point out that despite these caveats, it is still the case that the academy does have, inevitably, through its focus on research, particular expertise in such propositional knowledge. I contend that Zeichner’s argument (Zeichner 2014, 2016, 2020), and other similar arguments (Chan 2019; Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999; Gorodetsky and Barak 2008), underplay this particular expertise. As such, they tend to ignore the real tensions that exist between calling for democracy in teacher education linked to the development of ‘third spaces’ where school and university cultures can be enmeshed, and maintaining a distinct role for the place of propositional knowledge and evidence, informed by the particular expertise of university staff, at different stages of teacher education and professional development. This is particularly the case if universities see their role in teacher education as being solely focused on providing critical or sociological perspectives on education. For teacher education for inclusion, this point also has particular importance, as many

theorists, as noted, such as Hodkinson (2012, 2020) or Slee (2018) have consistently argued against any emphasis on propositional knowledge derived from psychology or other disciplines related to particular categories of children in preparing teachers to work with children with SEN. The dangers of this for the effective inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream settings, are, as Rata (2012) notes that it potentially denies, to this marginalised group, the benefits of the ‘fruits of the enlightenment’. In other words, it denies them the potential benefits in terms of academic and social development that the propositional knowledge derived from psychology, mediated through the expert role of universities, could bring. The analysis presented in this paper presents an important counterweight to such arguments, by setting out the potential importance of propositional knowledge about SEN in teacher education for inclusion. This paper provides further argues universities have a role to play in making content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge for SEN accessible to beginning teachers at the pre-service, novice teacher and early career stages of development.

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