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Studying the effectiveness of teacher education

Report

Principals and new teachers in Victoria and Queensland are invited to participate in a longitudinal study designed to investigate teacher preparation and induction. The project, known as Studying the Effectiveness of Teacher Education (SETE), is focusing on how well new teachers feel prepared for the variety of school settings in which they are employed, and also analyses graduate employment destinations, pathways into the profession and teacher attrition and retention.

The SETE project is the first of its kind in Australia in terms of breadth and scope, involving up to 15,000 early career teachers and 1,600 principals. Its results will inform policies and practices for effective pre-service teacher education and induction into the profession.

SETE emerged from, and is supported by, a strong partnership between Deakin University, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), the Queensland Department of Education and Training (QDET), the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT), the Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) and Griffith University. It has received funding from the Australian Research Council.

A number of components are included in the research. Principals and 2010/2011 graduate
teachers registered in Victoria and Queensland are being surveyed several times in 2012 and 2013 to ascertain their views about the effectiveness of their preparation for beginning teaching in schools across both states. In addition, case studies of individual schools are being conducted to examine the interrelationships of teacher knowledge, teacher practice and student learning in their school contexts. The researchers will visit each of the selected schools regularly throughout the project. Schools are being selected because they have a number of early career teachers and provide representativeness in relation to size, location, type (ie P–12), cultural and linguistic diversity, proportion of students with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, proportion of students with special needs, and socio-economic factors.

SETE researchers are also examining large-scale quantitative stakeholder data sets. From this examination, it will be possible to track which graduates from which types of teacher education programs are registered to teach; plot where recent graduates are employed to teach and in what types of schools; and understand how early career teachers utilise their developing professional knowledge. The findings will inform national thinking with regard to teacher quality, professional accreditation and standards.

SETE is being conducted concurrently with the national Longitudinal Teacher Workforce Main Study (LTWMS), and complements this study. LTWMS is tracking all 2011 teacher education graduates in other states and territories across Australia. Like SETE, through a series of surveys over a two-year period, LTWMS will collect data on the impact of pre-service education and early career experiences on teacher quality, supply and distribution. The study is funded through the Teacher Quality National Partnership and managed by the National Teacher Workforce Data Set Working Group, chaired by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. For further information contact Dr. Suzanne North (suzanne.north@unimelb.edu.au).
Rationale for SETE

A succession of reports over the past decade have highlighted the need for large-scale longitudinal studies of the effectiveness and impact of teacher education (e.g., Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003; Education and Training Committee, 2005; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007; Ramsey, 2000). The quality and effectiveness of pre-service teacher education is increasingly being questioned in many parts of the world, with suggestions that teacher education falls short in preparing graduates for the challenges of teaching in the diverse settings in which they are employed. In the USA, Grossman has gone so far as to say that “as researchers and practitioners in the field of teacher education, we seem ill prepared to respond to critics who question the value of professional education for teachers with evidence of our effectiveness” (2008, p.13). SETE sets out to address this issue and provide evidence of the effectiveness of teacher education to inform policy makers as well as teacher educators.

Current research evidence on the effectiveness of teacher education

In both the USA and Australia major research grants are rare in the field of teacher education, so teacher educators often study their own teacher education programs. As a result, the research literature is dominated by small-scale and often disconnected studies of teacher education practice. From these studies, teacher educators have learnt a great deal about the curriculum of effective teacher education (its coursework, field experiences, assessment, and pedagogical approaches), but a significant gap remains for high-quality, larger-scale research into teacher education and its effectiveness (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Lasley, Siedentop, & Yinger, 2006).

Some studies purport to establish the effectiveness of teacher education by comparing things like the student learning outcomes of teachers with various types of qualifications. For example, Darling-Hammond, LaFors and Snyder's (2001) review of
studies of student achievement concluded that 'teachers' qualifications, based on measures of knowledge and expertise, education, and experience, account for a larger share of the variance in students' achievement than any other single factor, including poverty, race, and parent education' (p.10). However, what that widely-cited review does not address is the question of how teacher education specifically adds value to early career teachers' effectiveness, beyond acknowledging that qualifications are significant. The issue is: can early career teachers' effectiveness be tracked back to their teacher education programs and the particular characteristics of those programs?

Two recent studies in the USA are examining these issues. One, in New York City, is investigating different pathways into teaching, the characteristic of those programs and the impact of their characteristics on a range of things, including student achievement in reading and mathematics (Boyd, et al., 2006). The other, in Ohio (Lasley, et al., 2006), is similarly ambitious in its scope and its goal to identify the impact of teacher education programs on teacher effectiveness. These studies highlight the scale needed for anything valid or generalisable to emerge from such inquiry, as well as the range of variables that need to be considered.

The Australian context

SETE is timely in the current Australian policy context. There is currently an historic convergence of national agendas, with the introduction of the Australian Curriculum, national testing of literacy and numeracy through NAPLAN, and the introduction of the My School website. SETE also aligns with the Improving Teacher Quality National Partnership program in which national professional standards for teachers, national accreditation of teacher education programs, and alternative pathways to teaching are being developed.

Australian employing authorities need to staff schools in a variety of communities, ranging from remote Indigenous settlements to metropolitan schools catering for an influx of young people from refugee backgrounds. Challenging curriculum expectations and increasingly diverse learners mean
that teachers need to be more sophisticated in their understanding and flexible in response to specific learning contexts, rather than implementing set routines.

**Conceptualising teacher quality and effectiveness**

Teachers matter in the education and achievement of their students (Day, Sammons, Stobart, & Gu, 2007) thereby contributing significantly to the social and economic wellbeing of society (Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD), 2005). The question is, what kind of teachers matter most? What is the role of teacher education programs in contributing to teacher quality and effectiveness? SETE is responding to these questions by exploring the role of teacher education programs and professional learning in becoming an effective practitioner. By implication, any inquiry concerning the value added by professional learning asks what sort of teacher we should regard as an effective one – what qualities or features of teacher preparation courses are instrumental in one becoming a good teacher and how these interact with one's personal qualities in practice (Carr, 2006). In doing so, the project will not only tap into the technical aspects of effective teaching practice but also into its ethical and moral aspects. The conceptual significance and innovation of this project lies in the complex view of quality teaching as an interplay of the professional and the personal, of 'knowledge-for-practice' and 'knowledge-in-practice' and of the technical and the ethical.

To capture the complexity of such interplay, the project team uses the concept of backward mapping. That is, it does not start from the inquiry into teacher preparation courses to trace their effects on the practices of beginning teachers but rather from the exploration of early career teachers' everyday practices in schools, tracing their practices back to their pre-service professional learning in various teacher education courses.

**Informing policy at state and national levels**
The outcomes of this study will inform policy makers at state and national levels, professional regulation authorities in their role of accrediting teacher education programs, and universities in the design and delivery of teacher education.

While there is a surfeit of small-scale, nuanced case studies that speak about the particularities of specific teacher education practices, Australia has lacked a large-scale, systematic, longitudinal study that can provide rich and comprehensive data. This is increasingly urgent in the context of current national educational reforms. Only a large-scale, longitudinal study will provide the necessary body of evidence about early career teacher practices in different schooling contexts and across discipline areas to inform these and future policy agendas.

**How principals and new teachers participate**

Teachers interested in taking part should keep an eye out for an email invitation or reminder from the Victorian Institute of Teaching or Queensland College of Teachers. Links to the first teacher survey were emailed to eligible teacher education graduates in March and April. The closing date for responses to this survey is May 14. Round two teacher surveys will be distributed in October 2012 and round three surveys in March 2013.

Principal surveys will be distributed in May and November 2012, and May 2013.

The success of the research rests upon the involvement of teachers and principals, and the project team are hopeful that those invited will choose to contribute.

**References**


KLA

**Subject Headings**

Teacher training
Educational planning
Educational evaluation
Education policy
Queensland
Victoria