A Rhetoric of Certainty: Modern Knowledge Practices in Contemporary Education

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ABSTRACT
The past decade has seen increasingly tightly specified graduate outcomes for undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education courses across much of the developed world. These outcomes potentially have the power to describe what ought to be seen as the proper sphere of school education. In this chapter, the author draws upon education policy documents, state education regulations, and parliamentary reports to write about common sense accounts of the goals and purposes of compulsory state schooling and the regulation of pre-service teacher education in universities. The author considers the implications of these accounts for teacher professionalism and argues for a more visible assertion of the complexity of education. Finally, the author considers the implications of this recommendation for pre-service teacher education in universities.

INTRODUCTION
Education is increasingly driven by a rhetoric of certainty. By this I mean that current processes of regulation of school and university education imply that knowledge acquisition – learning – and knowledge production – research – can be controlled and clearly specified. Further, the forms of these regulations implicitly and often explicitly convey a message that research and student learning should be controlled by structures that are external to the educating institution. My core concern in this chapter is with pre-service teacher education in universities. Because pre-service teachers are being educated in one sector of education so that they may work in another sector, their education is impacted upon by policy and expectations about school education and also by those that apply to tertiary education. For this reason, my argument moves between considerations that apply mainly in primary and secondary school education, mainly in tertiary education and those that apply across all these sectors.

State education policy and public discourse about schools have at least three impacts on the work of academics who teach in faculties of
education. Firstly, policy can control entry to the courses they teach: effectively their students are selected according to criteria set, at least in part, by public expectations about teacher quality. Secondly, it is generally expected that their students will graduate as competent teachers, and what counts as teacher competency is increasingly being specified by state policy. Thirdly, as tertiary education has come to be seen as an extension of school education, it has become subject to competency–based, outcomes–oriented controls that mimic those that prevail in school education (Barrie, Hughes, Smith & Thomson, 2009). As teachers within this system, academics must work within the mandated structure.

The past decade has seen increasingly tightly specified graduate outcomes for undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education courses across much of the developed world (Fitzgerald, 2014; Sleeter, 2008). These outcomes potentially have the power to describe what ought to be seen as the proper sphere of school education. They privilege practical teacher knowledge of the type that is easily expressed as measurable outcomes. They also create an impression of what should be seen as the proper sphere of academic knowledge about school and university education. Increasingly what is valued is what can be readily measured.

In this chapter I draw upon education policy documents, state education regulations and parliamentary reports to write about three broad aspects of education. Firstly, I consider common sense accounts of the goals and purposes of compulsory state schooling, especially in relation to the framing of school education as teaching and learning. I consider the implications of these expectations for teacher professionalism: here I suggest that tightly regulated professional behavior cannot be regarded as professionalism, and propose an alternative approach. Next I consider the regulation of tertiary education in Australia, in particular the regulation of pre–service teacher education in universities. I then describe the regulation of teachers in schools and I provide an example drawn from an Australian school region to illustrate the tone and type of instruction given to school teachers. I use this example to illustrate the ways in which student learning in schools has come to be represented as a simple technical activity that, nonetheless, is framed as the purpose of education. I argue that, when taken all together, the things that are said about school education and, to a lesser extent, tertiary education, comprise a rhetoric of certainty that is unlikely to be satisfied.

What tends to be neglected in the dominant debate is a broader discussion about the proper purposes of education, about values in education and about the role education has in re–imagining future societies (Biesta, 2009, 2010a). Instead, what we see is bureaucratization of knowledge, with regard to what should be taught, how it should be taught and what account should be given of it. I argue for a more visible assertion of the complexity of education, and for an improved understanding that practitioner knowledge about student learning stands in a complex relationship with the broader goals of education. Finally, I consider the implications of this recommendation for pre–service teacher education in universities.

**COMMON SENSE ACCOUNTS OF SCHOOL EDUCATION AS TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Common sense draws upon deeply rooted beliefs that may have gone unacknowledged and unexamined for a very long time. These beliefs may or may not survive the critical scrutiny that should characterize research, and thus the relationship between research and common sense can be problematic. Harvey (2007) describes good sense as being “constructed out of critical engagement with the issues of the day” (p. 39), while common sense, which generally draws on established practice, can be misleading or prejudiced.