

The Debate about Re-opening Teacher Education Colleges



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During 1999, the call for re-opening teacher education colleges was made repeatedly as campaigning for the election gained momentum. It was reiterated and debated at the National Teacher Education Summit held at the end of June 2009. Here a resolution was taken to investigate the issue further. The call for the re-opening of teacher education colleges provides pause for thought. Should they be re-opened? Will they address the need for both more and better teachers? It is worth considering the arguments for and against re-opening them, as well as how the idea has evolved since it was first mooted.

A Brief History

Teacher education institutions in South Africa developed in a haphazard way out of mission schools, universities and a host of local and regional initiatives, but from the 1960s onwards were more forcefully planned and segregated along the lines of race and ethnicity. Control was divided between universities and provinces; on the whole, students intending to become primary school teachers trained at provincially-controlled racially segregated colleges of education, and would-be secondary school teachers trained at segregated universities.

Colleges of education proliferated from the 1960s, when the apartheid state used them to control and divert African aspirations and advancement from urban areas by locating higher education institutions in the 'homelands'. Thus, it was hoped the graduates would staff 'homeland' bureaucracies and schools in these economically unviable areas. High enrolments in education colleges during the apartheid period resulted partly because positions in the formal economy were limited and partly because they provided the possibility for some form of higher education.¹ Provision was also influenced by 'the amount of money the various departments of education were willing to spend on subsidies to universities and universities of technology and budgets for colleges'².

Information about the number of institutions providing training, the number of students in training, and the number of students qualifying when the college system was in existence is poor. Reported statistics vary widely. Some estimate there to have been 71,008 students in training in 1994; others 80,000.³ These differences exist because there was no national system of information and the data were as fragmented as the governance of institutions. Bantustan systems of information where most teacher education colleges were located, were notoriously weak.

In the early 1990s, policy-making processes for a post-apartheid South Africa were dominated by higher education constituencies and cost considerations. Perspectives on the colleges immediately after the 1994 democratic elections were not positive. Even though college staff members were mostly unionised – some belonging to the associations that came to form the National Professional Teachers Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA), but many also belonging to the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) – they did not have much impact on the direction of debate.⁴

Although many colleges, especially those serving white, Indian and coloured students, developed relationships with universities, they were on the whole considered to be junior partners in these arrangements. The pecking order was clear. As change became imminent, college rectors from these institutions formed their own organisation, the Committee of College Education Rectors of South Africa (CCERSA), to anticipate and respond to change. Some colleges in rural areas were part of this process, others not.

By the mid-1990s, some colleges were internally better equipped than others to respond to change and this often took a racial and urban/rural form. While a few colleges in rural areas were “showpieces in the dust, with manicured lawns and fountains,” many were also “quite rotten, with grass higher than you could see through, terrible facilities, chairs in the quadrangle just rotting away.... underperforming and problematic in terms of turning out quality teachers”.⁵ Many, especially in rural areas were torn by conflict between the mainly Afrikaans-speaking administrations and mainly black staff and students. Ros Jaff, who visited teacher education colleges as part of the National Teacher Education Audit, recalls that many of them were “embattled” institutions “under fire from young students.” “I will never forget,” she says, “the one college: the administration block was like the American embassy: you went in through a cage. The typically Afrikaans-speaking leadership was literally separated by walls, cages and partitions from the student group. There was fear, victimisation, entitlement of students, a new type of selfhood, anger at the malaise, a desire for places, people hungry for opportunity. Many colleges were under siege.” Yet others recall their experiences as students, lecturers and rectors with varying degrees of nostalgia, but recognition that each college, for various reasons, needed to change.⁶ The voice and role of colleges within policy-making processes considering supply was however weak. One interviewee who had been in Indumiso near Pietermaritzburg argued that actual isolation of and competition between colleges meant that each thought it would survive and that those lower in the food-chain would be closed. Each felt itself superior to others.⁷ Unfortunately, these relative strengths were flattened in the policy-process that followed during the 1990s.

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In the policy-making context of the early and mid-1990s, debate raged around the degree of flexibility that should be given colleges. The National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE) proposed that they be incorporated into universities. Policy research with college interests in mind advised that they be restructured rather than expanded or closed.⁸ The College Council of Education Rectors of South Africa was of the view that colleges should retain a degree of autonomy, and should be given councils and senates where they did not have them; in addition, a National Council for Teacher Education should be formed to set in place a process for colleges which did not have the capacity to become fully fledged institutions of higher education.⁹ Many of the latter suggestions built

on developments that were already occurring in the teacher education college constituency and which had begun to take shape in a climate of freer debate and discussion after 1994.

Ultimately the NCHE and cost-cutting arguments won the day. Colleges were, as even the NTEA pointed out, often small, expensive and heavily subsidised by the state. Low student to lecturer ratios were not seen as a quality advantage, but as an inefficient use of resources. A Green Paper on higher education transformation¹⁰ confirmed the approach that internal efficiency in higher education would be produced through “reducing unit costs and increasing productivity”. Such measures would include regional rationalisation, “restructuring and where necessary closing programmes that do not achieve economies of scale”.¹¹

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The momentum for rationalising teacher education colleges was in full swing from 1997 onwards, when Section 21 of the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997) made all teacher education, and therefore colleges of education, part of the higher education system. A task team on colleges was appointed in August 1997 and reported to the Heads of Education Departments Committee (HEDCOM) and to the Council of Education Ministers (CEM) in mid-1999.¹² Colleges of education were given the option to become autonomous higher education institutions if they could achieve a minimum enrolment of 2 000 full-time-equivalent students, or to become part of existing universities and universities of technology. According to Ben Parker, head of the task team responsible for college closures, provinces began restructuring their colleges and identifying those colleges suitable for incorporation into higher education.¹³ From 1997, provinces controlled the supply of teachers by placing stringent quotas on new enrolments, leading to a rapid decline in college enrolments – from 71 000 (or 80 000) in 1994 to 15 000 in 2000. Lecturers from phased-out colleges of education were absorbed into provincial departments of education through provincial chambers of the ELRC.¹⁴

At the same time, teacher education curriculum changes were placing further stresses on institutions. The Norms and Standards for Teacher Education¹⁵ introduced a national core curriculum based on seven roles of teachers and linked teacher education to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). And the introduction of outcomes-based education in 1997 was also presupposed on the existence of well-qualified teachers in command of their subject matter. Ironically, the processes intended to ensure that such teachers came into existence were highly complex and short-circuited by the complexities and unintended consequences of absorption and merger.

On 1 January 2001, colleges of education were formally incorporated into existing universities and universities of technology. Their number reduced from 32 universities and universities of technology offering teacher education qualifications to 26.¹⁶ Unions were at the time absorbed in the policy processes directly affecting schools, such as the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996), and were only indirectly involved in teacher-supply and provision issues. There were thus at the time no strong voices arguing against restructuring. The main role of the unions was to negotiate better terms of exit for their members. Dave Balt from NAPTOSA has also indicated that unions attempted to secure favourable financial conditions for teacher education in discussions with the then Minister Bhengu, but failed to do so.¹⁷

Arguments For

The main argument for the re-opening in recent years has been made most strongly by SADTU. Their view is that teacher shortages demand it, especially shortages in the foundation phase and mother tongue, as well as maths and science. Unions have long been concerned about teacher shortages and both SADTU and NAPTOSA have indeed commissioned research on it.¹⁸ Union concern for teacher shortages is linked to the issue of reducing class size. Here the argument is that increased numbers will reduce class size and hence improve quality. Both unions' ongoing interest in large class sizes with which members have to battle has also given rise to annual representations in the MTEF provincial exercises for revision of the post-provisioning model and for smaller class sizes. In 2002, SADTU argued that the post-provisioning model together with user fees had "entrenched and deepened inequality within public education"¹⁹. It has also expressed ongoing concern about the need for training of its members in the new curriculum. At its National Congress in 2006, SADTU recommended a simple approach of a maximum class size of 30 to replace all existing formulas. If this is to be realised, then more teachers will be needed. In order to support the training of more teachers, SADTU in 2007/8 also called for the reopening of teacher education colleges.

Although the call for re-opening colleges is intended to produce more teachers in order to reduce class sizes, arguments for the re-opening of teacher education colleges are often an argument against provision of teacher education training by higher education institutions. Three points are usually made. First, the third-class status of primary education and second class status of teacher education in higher education means that it receives insufficient attention. Second, universities especially have entrance criteria for primary school teachers that are inappropriate and exclude many aspiring and potential teachers²⁰. University fees are simply too high, especially for young African women from rural areas. Third, higher education institutions may have served secondary education well but they are not attuned to what it takes to train primary teachers. University education is too theoretical and abstract. As many former college students and lecturers attest, colleges provided hands-on training, a practical education that today's universities and universities of technology do not provide. Higher education institutions are often considered to be inadequately capacitated to address the needs at primary school level. They do not use or provide opportunities for experienced principals and teachers to participate in training future teachers.

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There is some truth to these arguments, although there is no reason why, once these issues are known, government and higher education institutions cannot be flexible enough to address them. As Michael Samuel, Dean of the Faculty of UKZN said at the National Teacher Education Summit, re-opening teacher education colleges may be the wrong solution to correctly-identified problems.

Arguments Against

Arguments against re-opening have come from Deans of Education, analysts like Jonathan Jansen and those involved in teacher education provision. The main argument here is that there are historical, practical, political, economic and educational reasons not to re-open them but to build on what now exists.

The view is that there were good reasons for restructuring teacher education in the 1990s. First, if teacher education was to be racially integrated, then they needed to be integrated. Second, it made economic sense to consolidate provision and

quality rather than have myriad small colleges dotted all over the place unable to guarantee quality. Many colleges' pupil teacher ratios were often lower than those in schools and this made them too expensive to maintain. And finally, the quality of teacher education provided was extremely varied — while excellent in some, it was abysmal in others. Many in the rural areas were disparagingly referred to as "glorified high schools" and teachers were considered often to have learnt little more than the existing matric syllabus unless their college was linked to a university. Undertaking another round of restructuring would simply flatten an already-battered teacher education force.²¹ Improving quality of existing teacher education is the priority.

The problem is not the absence of colleges, but the attractiveness of teaching as a profession — and this in turn means addressing issues like salaries, conditions of work, and status of the profession.

Questions are further posed about whether re-opening colleges will in fact solve the teacher shortage problem, a challenge with quantitative but primarily qualitative dimensions. Also, there are many challenges related to the recruitment and retention of teachers that need to be taken into account. Attracting students to new colleges will be as much of a problem as it is for current higher education institutions. The problem is not the absence of colleges, but the attractiveness of teaching as a profession — and this in turn means addressing issues like salaries, conditions of work, and status of the profession²². Attracting quality lecturers to new colleges in rural areas will be difficult, and will require incentives.

Beginner teachers face specific problems and need support if they are not to leave teaching²³. Departmental officials have stated publically on several occasions, that newly-trained maths and science teachers supported by the (Funza Lushaka) bursary scheme are finding it difficult to find placements in schools. Added to this, there is ample evidence that even where teachers are trained in maths and science, schools do not employ them to do so and teachers untrained to teach maths are often found doing so²⁴. And finally, starting new colleges rather than ensuring our existing institutions are doing the job is simply impractical in the current financial climate. Many existing higher education institutions situated in rural areas simply need to be doing a better job at training teachers.

It can also be argued that describing what happened to them as 'closure' and positing what needs to happen as 're-opening' is a false representation of what did happen and what can happen. Teacher education colleges were not closed. The good ones were incorporated into higher education institutions, several of them in rural areas. They all lost their specific identities and roles, but they still exist and serve educational purposes. Approximately a quarter of the weaker ones became FET colleges that have now been recapitalised as part of that initiative and are now inappropriate for use as teacher education colleges. The remainder are high schools, community colleges or provincial training centres — they are all in some use or another. What does 're-opening' in this context mean?

Distilling the Debate

There are many difficult questions to answer in this debate. Although the arguments here are sound, too, they do not answer the question related to the search for alternatives to what is perceived to be inadequately targeted and poor quality teacher training in higher education.

Higher education institutions have been slow to respond to the criticisms of the mismatched and poor training that they provide, often in an effort to meet departmental prescriptions. Neither urban nor rurally-based higher education

institutions have yet grasped the opportunity to show how they could meet the demand for expanded provision in rural areas. Government has responded by considering a number of models that would include expanding teacher education provision and locating the training of Foundation Phase teachers, for example, in current FET colleges. These models have not yet had an adequate airing in the public arena. Different alternatives and possibilities need to be considered. Would it make sense, for example, to re-open one college as a model, monitor its success and replicate it if it works? It would mean converting a recently-recapitalised FET college back into a teacher education institution, relocating existing staff, recruiting new staff and instituting new programmes. This is clearly a long-term process.

The interesting immediate question though, is related to the discourse of loss and restoration that the discussion around teacher education colleges evokes. The discourse around teacher education colleges has been and remains an extremely emotional one, often a quintessentially romantic and nostalgic one. The discourse expresses a sense of unrecognised loss and longing. Similar discourses are dealt with by Cheryl Walker in her book, *Landmarked* (2009), and Jacob Dlamini, in his book, *Native Nostalgia* (2009).

In her discussion of land restitution processes, Cheryl Walker argues that in some cases land restitution efforts are not about restoring the actual land, but the communities and relationships that existed on that land in the past. The desire for the restoration of the land symbolises the restoration of that community. It is often no longer possible however to restore these – “(it is) not possible to recreate the relationships to places and people and ways of being in the world that are past”²⁵. Jacob Dlamini draws on the concept of nostalgia to explore what it means to have lived under apartheid as a black person and reflect on it with longing and loss.

“Such longing and loss run counter to the dominant ‘romantic telling’ of the past in which there is a neat separation between a merry precolonial Africa, a miserable apartheid South Africa and a marvelous new South Africa in which everyone is living democratically ever after”²⁶.

For most South Africans, he says, it is not like this. The past for many black South Africans is much too complex and rich. He points out that “the irony about nostalgia is that, for all its fixation with the past, it is essentially about the present. It is about present anxieties refracted through the prism of the past.”²⁷

And so, we can read the discourse of loss and restoration of teacher education colleges through these insightful approaches as an effort to rekindle a sense of relationship and community that existed in teacher education colleges that it is felt has now been lost in the present in new teacher education arrangements. The feelings of loss are about the present not the past. These college communities were probably as fractured and conflicted as any today; we know little about their histories, and need to know more.

Whatever the past of the colleges, their past exists in the present in the memories of lecturers and their students. In memory, whether true or false, they are seen as having created teachers who taught students in disciplined environments and who can do so again.

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The animating desire of the discourse of loss and restoration of teacher education colleges can thus be seen as a positive one. The teachers and lecturers from these colleges have now moved into all walks of life and many hold key positions in public life and the private sector. Divided by the present, they are united in a common history. The call for restoring teacher education colleges is arguably a call for a restoration of a common experience and history as well as of an educational community bound by a common commitment to teaching. This is not only a discourse romantically harking back to a past. It is also one that is attempting to signal a different future from the present and from which we can learn and draw to reinvigorate teacher education and teaching.

In conclusion, the challenges of producing quality teachers in adequate numbers go well beyond the re-opening of teacher education colleges. The call for doing so has rightly focused attention on the weaknesses in current provision and the need to pay greater attention to provision and quality of teacher education. This is the challenge for the foreseeable future.

Note: This article draws from Linda Chisholm (2009) *An Overview of Research, Policy and Practice in Teacher Supply and Demand 1994-2008*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

NOTES

- ¹ Crouch 2002; Sayed 2004
- ² Parker 2002: 21
- ³ Jaff et al. 1995; Parker, 2002
- ⁴ Dave Balt, 2009; Jon Lewis, 2009; see also Govender, 2004
- ⁵ Jaff, 2009
- ⁶ Interviews conducted with former rectors, lecturers and students at Edgewood, Springfield, Bechet, Ndamiso and Eshowe teacher training colleges in the former Natal and kwa-Zulu in 2008 and Mankwe and Tihabane in the former Bophutatswana,
- ⁷ Interview conducted by the author with Nonhlanhla Mthiyane at Mariannhill on 20 June 2008.
- ⁸ Hofmeyr et al. 1994
- ⁹ see Kgobe 2003
- ¹⁰ DoE 1996
- ¹¹ DoE 1996: 17
- ¹² Parker 2002
- ¹³ Parker 2002
- ¹⁴ Dhaya Govender, 2009
- ¹⁵ DoE 1997
- ¹⁶ National Assembly (19/06/2006), For written reply: Question 699. Internal Question Paper No. 18-2006.
- ¹⁷ Dave Balt, 2009
- ¹⁸ see Pelzer, Shisana et al., 2005
- ¹⁹ SADTU 2002, n.p.
- ²⁰ Paterson and Arends, 2008
- ²¹ Kruss, 2008; 2009
- ²² see Cosser, 2009 a and b
- ²³ Arends and Phurutse, 2009
- ²⁴ Arends, 2009
- ²⁵ Walker, 2009, 26
- ²⁶ 2009, 12
- ²⁷ 2009, 16

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