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Theory to Practice: Is there a real connection for teachers in teacher  
education?

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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School of Arts, Development and Health Education  
Health and Physical Education

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## STATEMENT BY CANDIDATE

I certify that the Thesis, "Theory to Practice: Is there a real connection for teachers in teacher education?" is my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree at any other institution.

To the best of my knowledge no material in the thesis has been previously published or written except where this has been stated and referenced.

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the process of learning to teach, which is the focus and objective of the one year Diploma of Teaching (Secondary), and to assess whether education in theory can make a difference in graduate teacher competence.

Questionnaires and semi structured interviews were used to ascertain the perceptions of student and beginning teachers on how well theory and practice are integrated in the Diploma programme. The study would indicate that student teachers appear to see little relevance of theory to classroom practice. The study also suggests that student teachers believe that the majority of learning occurs in classrooms during the practical teaching experience and consider that the mastery of management is the most crucial factor of teaching.

The research also sought to establish to what extent students bring established beliefs with them to University and the extent to which their perceptions of what constitutes an effective teacher. It was apparent that student teachers had, at least in the beginning, established opinions based on their own experiences as school students, about what constitutes an effective teacher. These student teachers also claim that associate teachers varied hugely in their ability to support and give feedback to student teachers in the classroom, and indicated that it was difficult for the college tutors to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

The findings of the study will suggest fundamental changes need to be made to the organisational structure of teacher education in order to meet the needs of the modern teacher with modern classrooms.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study explores the effectiveness of the structure and delivery of the training and education provided for graduate student teachers, whose perceptions will be gathered after one year of study and practice. The study will assess the extent to which they have become effective beginning teachers, teachers who are aware of the interface between theory and practice; who can integrate theory and practice; who understand the knowledge and skills required to apply good pedagogical teaching strategies appropriately, and who understand the rationale for critical thinking and critical action (Programme Aims, Paper number 136.431 p. 2).

Having been involved in teacher education for over twenty years it seemed to the researcher that in spite of much knowledge and many skills, beginning teachers were not as confident in the classroom as they might be after three or four years of preparation. Research of the one year programme will hopefully give the students a voice and provide an opportunity to consider that there may be a more effective way to establish the content and process of the programme.

Brouwer and Korthagen (2005) claim that the experience of the student teachers' own schooling has a big influence on their beliefs and values, and that this experience should be taken into consideration if pre-service training for teacher education is to be effective. In particular, theory and practice need to be well integrated in teacher education.

The school culture is formative and has the effect of influencing the beginning teacher and preventing them from acting in a way that does not 'fit'. It can be difficult, if not impossible, for a beginning teacher to significantly change established and well entrenched practice in schools. This socialization in schools can generate a 'washout' during teaching experience and the images of beginning

teachers are often shattered when faced with reality in the classroom. This 'washout' is described by Korthagen & Kessels (1999) as a diluting of beliefs and values when student and beginning teachers are surrounded by the particular culture of the school. This culture may well not be aligned with their own values and beliefs about teaching. This dilemma often causes beginning teachers to struggle for control and management of the class and so go into 'survival mode'. Many student teachers do not feel well prepared by lecturers in teacher education so take notice of teachers in schools who are successfully teaching pupils in the classroom. Hatton & Smith (1995) drew the same conclusion from their research four years earlier than Korthagen & Kessels (1999)

The research study carried out at Konstanz University in Germany as cited in Brouwer & Korthagen (2005) that the most successful programmes in teacher education were ones with an integrative approach in which student teachers practical experiences are closely linked to theoretical input. This combination tends to empower the beginning teacher and is more likely to lead to the development of innovative and independently reflective teacher competence.

Ben-Peretz (1995) noted that transparent teacher education would help to communicate a cohesive view of knowledge, and Wideen et al (1998) believe we need to take a closer look at the learning process involved during the time teachers are practicing to develop their competence and expand their professional skills.

Integration of theory and practice refers to arranging competence acquisition as a gradual process which provides a step for the next stage of the process of becoming a competent beginning teacher. Integration also means coordinating the acquisition of theoretical knowledge whilst developing teaching skills and adopting learning as an enquiry and reflection into one's own actions. In other words relevant incidents which are real experiences may better equip the student or beginning teacher to be a more reflective teacher than tutoring the

student teacher in theory which may be disconnected from the student teacher's actual practice. Ben-Peretz (1995) claims that, in order to prepare beginning teachers for future classrooms, there needs to be a deliberate decision to improve teacher education, and action needs to be taken to integrate theory and practice. Will it then be possible to call it a praxis?