

Chapter 6

Online Teacher Education: A Case Study from New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports a study which examined experiences of nine beginning teachers who completed their initial teacher education in the online mode. The study investigated reported perceptions during their first six months teaching. Participants found the content of the online program comprehensive, prepared them well to begin teaching, and provided an opportunity for Māori (New Zealand's indigenous people) to become high school teachers. Main advantages of studying online were: flexibility; saving time and money; developing skills and personal attributes such as independence; and for some, the only way to become teachers. The major disadvantage was the difficulty of studying alone despite an interactive delivery platform. Also, participants were concerned learning online did not allow modelling of teaching skills and this impacted on participants' classroom practice. Recommendations include creating connections for online learners; using skilled staff; creating culturally appropriate online environments; and incorporating opportunities for face-to-face interaction in online initial teacher education.

INTRODUCTION

A beginning high school teacher enters a complex system and is charged with the education of up to 100 teenagers annually. Teachers have substantial impact on student success; as Hattie (2009) claimed, the effect size of the teacher on student learning is 30 percent. Therefore, all initial teacher education (ITE), including that delivered online, must produce effective, high-quality teachers. To

ensure high quality ITE in all modes research is needed to investigate their effectiveness.

Research into distance ITE in New Zealand is quite limited due to distance ITE being a relatively recent phenomenon. It began in the 1990s after a major restructure of the education system which allowed tertiary education institutions to set their own directions (Simpson, 2003). Major (2005) noted some ITE providers moved to develop distance programs to reach an untapped market of

students who were unable, or unwilling, to move to access teacher education. The program in this study had its origins in this deregulated market. Kane (2005) reports offering teacher qualifications by distance presents exciting opportunities, but it brings challenges, and more in-depth research is needed to shed light on the benefits and challenges of the different modes of delivery. The international literature on distance ITE reports a general consensus that distance ITE is effective if the underlying program is sound and based on the principles of effective teacher education. However, few have studied the graduates into teaching, citing inherent difficulties in doing this.

This chapter presents a case study from New Zealand which took up some of these challenges and followed nine beginning teachers, who completed ITE in the online mode, into their first six months of teaching. The main purpose of the study was to discover the ways an online program prepared student teachers for the reality of face-to-face teaching. The aims were to find out if beginning high school teachers who completed their ITE in the online medium perceived they were suitably prepared to teach in a face-to-face classroom and to make recommendations to assist the learning of online student teachers. Therefore the study investigated the participants' reported perceptions or constructions of the online program and their perceived readiness to begin teaching. It was the participants' journey to becoming a teacher through distance study that inspired this research.

The chapter begins with a short background to New Zealand and its education system, and then presents views from the existing literature on successful online ITE. Also, the literature focuses on the ability of online learning to meet the needs of indigenous populations. As with other former colonies, New Zealand has a minority indigenous population (the New Zealand Māori). New Zealand strives to be a bicultural nation in recognition of Māori as the original people (*tangatawhenua*). While biculturalism pervades all aspects of New Zealand society, it is particularly

relevant in education. There is strong demand for Māori teachers, so much so that in 2011 the New Zealand government offered 115 scholarships to Māori to train as high school teachers.

This chapter will provide evidence that distance learning can be successful for ITE and that an online program can provide for Māori student teachers in a way campus-based courses cannot. It will describe the ways in which the beginning teachers felt prepared and discusses the perceived advantages and disadvantages of studying to be a teacher online. It concludes by providing suggestions to make online ITE more effective, because, as Moore (2007) states, the question is no longer should we teach online, but *how*.

BACKGROUND

New Zealand

New Zealand is a small South Pacific country comprising two main islands and approximately the size of Great Britain or Colorado. The majority of New Zealand's 4.4 million population is of European descent (67%); Māori are the largest minority (14.6%), followed by Asians (9.2%) and non-Māori Polynesians (6.9%) (Statistics New Zealand, 2011). New Zealand has a modern, prosperous and developed market economy with an estimated gross domestic product at purchasing power parity per capita of about US\$28,250. According to the Human Development Index, New Zealand was the 3rd "most developed" country in the world (United Nations Development Programme, 2010) and ranked 4th in the 2011 Index of Economic Freedom (Heritage Foundation, 2011).

International tests show the New Zealand education system is highly ranked. Schooling is compulsory for children aged 6 to 16, although the majority of children start primary school at age five. At 12.5 mean years of schooling, New Zealand is the second highest in the world after Norway. New Zealand rates highly in the Pro-

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