

# Profession or trade? Why training NZ's teachers in the classroom is not the right answer

May 29 2024, by Kirsten Locke, Alex Gunn and Katrina McChesney

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Credit: Arthur Krijgsman from Pexels

How New Zealand trains teachers is about to change with the government's push to [increase the workforce by 1,500](#). The plan, announced ahead of the 2024 budget, includes funding 1,200 places for aspiring teachers to be trained in the classroom, rather than in universities as they currently are.

While there will still be funding for university places, the policy appears to prioritize school-based training. Trainee teachers will be based primarily in schools, with coursework on top of their daily teaching responsibilities.

It is a significant shift away from the dominant training model whereby student teachers undertake tertiary level courses alongside periods of teaching experience in schools.

By training teachers on site, the government hopes to improve classroom preparedness. It follows similar moves in the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

And to be fair, while a lot of the policy detail is unknown, [additional funding](#) of [teacher education](#) will almost certainly increase the number of places where prospective teachers can train.

However, moving away from university-based teacher education has the potential to undermine the profession by disconnecting teachers from [education research](#).

## **A profession, not a trade**

New Zealand's standalone education colleges [merged with universities](#) during the 1990s and early 2000s. In part, the change sought to

strengthen teachers' capacity to critically engage with complex teaching practices and evolving education research.

Like medicine, law, engineering and architecture, teaching is now considered a [profession](#). This means it has its own distinct body of knowledge, a code of ethics, and an independent governing and registering body.

Becoming a member of any profession involves a breadth and complexity of professional learning typically housed within a university. Teachers must learn to engage with research, develop [critical thinking](#), and recognize how their actions—and the actions of others—affect learning.

Indeed, the legally required [core characteristics](#) of universities in New Zealand include research, teaching, and their role as "critic and conscience of society." These characteristics mean universities can provide an ideal setting for the kind of professional training teachers need.

University-based teacher education still involves a substantial amount of time on school-based placements. This is where student teachers develop practical skills to complement their wider understanding of education, research and professional knowledge.

[Research](#) has also found time away from the classroom allows student teachers the space to engage in more abstract levels of critical thinking and personal development.

## **Devaluing university-based teacher education**

Shifting towards school-based training models signals a belief that the knowledge that matters for teacher education is to be found largely or

exclusively within schools themselves.

This [apprenticeship approach](#) requires student teachers to sit "at the side of the master"—learning primarily by observation and copying what they see.

Apprenticeship learning is an excellent way to approach adult education in many skills and trades. However, in a profession such as teaching it falls short. It adopts a "what works" approach without stopping to interrogate who it's working for and why.

An apprenticeship model can also only ever replicate current practice. Given the concern over educational outcomes in New Zealand, there needs to be real change—not more of the same.

Apprenticeship models typically focus on strategies, curriculum delivery and managing student behavior. Education research will become less accessible to those in the teaching profession, making it harder to implement any significant change.

Furthermore, apprenticeship models risk narrowing the teacher education curriculum by focusing on current practices and trends. Rather than being adopted outright, new teaching practices and trends need to be critiqued and examined within their historical, social, cultural and research contexts.

## **The challenge ahead**

Professionals recognize knowledge will continue to move over time. The best thing we can do is equip new teachers with [adaptive expertise](#)—the ability to think flexibly, to adapt to varied contexts, and to gain new understanding.

Universities must have a central place in New Zealand's teacher education if the profession is to be as strong as is needed.

The country needs teacher training to cultivate a worldview comfortable with complexity and with asking questions, seeking feedback, and gaining new understanding on unfamiliar topics.

The government needs to support the continual improvement of teacher training in all its forms, including within universities. The education of future generations depends on it.

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