Response to “The contribution of the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative to building knowledge about teaching and learning: A review of school sector projects, 2003–2012” from the primary sector perspective

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**Introduction**[1]

Thank you for this opportunity to engage with and comment on the report prepared by Mary Hill and Bronwen Cowie. In this brief response I will highlight the following topics as prompts for reflection and discussion:

- the strengths of the fund
- "coverage" of the primary sector
- ongoing tensions or concerns
- the role of theory
- future directions.

There is naturally some overlap in these areas and in some ways it may be artificial to separate them. Nonetheless, to ensure a wide scope and lively debate I have listed the topics as discrete areas. Throughout the discussion I have inserted a number of reflective questions as potential discussion starters.

**The strengths of the TLRI fund for the primary sector**

In my view, and supported by comments from international colleagues, we are in a most fortunate position here in Aotearoa New Zealand to have a fund that supports research grounded in a collaboration between teachers and researchers. The project priorities ask researchers to attend not only to strategic value and research value, but perhaps most importantly, researchers are asked to address practice value to direct our research energies towards projects that will impact teacher practice and student learning.

Another area of strength of TLRI is the way in which it supports teachers to engage with inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Some of the most powerful ways to shift professional practice is through teachers critically inquiring into their own practice and the achievement of their own students (Darling-Hammond, 2008). This is an area that deserves a continued emphasis in TLRI projects. This raises the question: How do we know what the teachers have learned about research, teaching and learning in any given project? This is quickly followed by Hill and Cowie's question about the link between teacher practice and student learning: "What evidence is presented about how changing teachers' knowledge, understanding and practices enhanced learning?" (p. 26). As noted by Gilmore (2007), the TLRI fund was intended to be a "strategic change tool" (p. 1). As TLRI continues to evolve we must not lose sight of this priority.

- *Should we place a greater emphasis on projects that will support teachers to inquire into their own practice?*

A further area of strength for the TLRI fund for the primary sector is its independence from Ministry of Education priorities. Schools are under pressure to place extra attention on mathematics and literacy in the wake of National Standards (see section on "Coverage" of the primary sector). In the United States, for

[1] Please note that the thinking captured in this response does not represent the University of Otago or the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

example, policies that focus on mathematics and literacy have led to some schools placing less of an emphasis on, or even omitting, other curriculum areas (Jennings & Rentner, 2006). TLRI's strategic location outside of the Ministry of Education supports researchers and educators to explore under-researched areas.

- *Do we need to reconsider the principles and/or priorities of TLRI to ensure we cast a wide net?*

**"Coverage"[2] of the primary sector**

Overall, the primary sector has been reasonably well represented in TLRI funded projects (41 percent). Hill and Cowie have clearly signalled in their review, however, that we have unevenly covered the curriculum areas in the primary sector. Literacy and mathematics attracted more funding than other areas. The areas of social sciences, health, physical education and learning languages were not represented in any of the projects analysed. The review indicates that the availability of nationally standardised tools in literacy and numeracy may be an influence. Some would view standardised measures of achievement as narrow conceptualisations of research evidence. Luke's challenge (2005) to reconsider what counts as evidence when developing policy is applicable to our brief here.

- *How can we develop projects that honour the complexity of teaching and learning in the primary sector?*
- *How can we diversify what counts as research evidence?*

The findings that some curriculum areas have not received any attention, I believe, encourage us to consider the need to widen our focus. One area that I believe warrants further attention is that of *integrated curriculum* (Bartlett, 2005a, 2005b; Beane, 1997). Curriculum integration has a great deal of potential to address concerns about the lack of attention to particular curriculum areas (see previous section), as well as create spaces for teachers and students to negotiate relevant and meaningful learning (Dowden, 2007; Fraser & Paraha, 2002).

- *Can projects focused on the role of integrated curriculum support us to step outside the bounds of curriculum areas?*

Finally, Hill and Cowie note the lack of attention to information communication technologies (ICTs). The studies to date clearly indicate that there is an urgent need for more professional development and research in this rapidly evolving area. Given the disparities between schools in terms of hardware, researchers may also have a role to play in advocacy and policy development.

- *How can we develop projects that support the sustainable use of ICT in teaching and learning?*

**Ongoing tensions and concerns**

[2] I have placed the term "coverage" in quotation marks to indicate my discontent with the ways in which curriculum can be "sliced and diced" in irrelevant and inauthentic ways for students to ensure that all areas have been "covered".

There is no denying that teaching and learning is a complex business. The realities of teaching make it difficult for teachers to find time to engage with research findings or inquire into their practice. If teachers are going to be able to benefit from the work of TLRI, researchers will need to find ways to disseminate findings that enable teachers to put them into practice. Hill and Cowie's finding that the Ministry of Education does not seem to be drawing upon the findings from TLRI projects to inform their work is very concerning.

- *How can we develop a programme of dissemination that supports teachers to engage with TLRI findings in ways that will enable them to sustain changes in their practice?*
- *Does TLRI need to play a greater role to facilitate the uptake of TLRI research findings?*

The dissemination of findings is about supporting teachers to make changes to their practice. As we well know, change in educational practice does not come easily (Bishop, O'Sullivan, & Berryman, 2010; Fullan, 1993). In order to implement and sustain change, researchers need to be cognisant of the complexities and realities of school life.

- *Do research dissemination plans work with the enabling structures and allow for the barriers to the implementation of change in schools?*

The complexity of teaching and learning also has implications for the development of research projects. Research with teachers and students has to acknowledge the very real barriers and constraints that are at work in schools.

- *Do research designs work with the enabling structures and allow for the barriers to conducting research in schools with teachers and students?*

**The role of theory**

I firmly believe that we need to develop a shared metalanguage around teaching and learning. Hill and Cowie raise their concerns around the use of terms like "effective" (p. 8). These terms become the soup du jour of educational parlance. Everyone uses them, but few take the time to define what they mean by them and they quickly lose any transformative power they may have held. TLRI has the potential to support educators to develop a shared metalanguage around teaching and learning by providing researchers and teachers with opportunities to discuss what they mean by various terms. How are we conceptualising teaching and learning? This work includes a discussion on the heritage and theoretical underpinnings of particular terms. Where does the term come from? What sorts of theoretical concepts lay behind it? What are the implications of deploying one term versus another for teaching and learning? I believe we do teachers a disservice when we do not involve them in considering the theory/ies behind various initiatives or practices because engaging in theory has the potential to challenge our thinking. Ball (1995) is worth quoting at length on this point:

> Theory is a vehicle for 'thinking otherwise'; it is a platform for 'outrageous hypotheses' and for unleashing criticism. Theory is destructive, disruptive and violent. It offers a language for challenge, and modes of thought, other than those articulated for us by dominant others. It provides a language of rigour and irony rather than contingency. The purpose of such theory is to

> de-familiarise present practices and categories, to make them seem less self-evident and necessary, and to open up spaces for the invention of new forms of experience. (p. 266)

- *How can we develop a shared metalanguage around teaching and learning that includes explicit discussions about the role of theory?*

**Future directions**

Hill and Cowie note "most of the studies investigated teaching practice (n=29)" (p. 19). While this should not be surprising given the focus on practice value, I believe that we should consider a programme of research that positions students to be involved in more agentic and authentic ways. The area of *student voice* is an under-researched area in the primary sector of New Zealand (for further discussion see Sandretto, with Klenner, 2011).

- *How can we locate students as powerful partners in research on teaching and learning?*

A focus on teaching practice implies that there may have been assumptions about the links between changes in teaching practice and associated changes in student learning. However, it is dangerous to make assumptions about the relationships between teaching and learning. I would like to echo Hill and Cowie's suggestion to diversify what counts as learning.

- *How can we develop projects that explore what counts as learning?*
- *How can we make learning explicit in ways that honour its diversity and flexibility?*

The student population in Aotearoa New Zealand continues to diversify. Projections suggest that by 2016 the population aged 0–17 will be 26 percent Māori, 13 percent Asian, 15 percent Pasifika and 69 percent European (Other/New Zealander) (Ministry of Social Development, 2010). These changing demographics will continue to challenge educators. We have had a number of significant projects into culturally relevant pedagogy (e.g., Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2009). One promising direction to continue work in this area is to identify what Ladson-Billings (1994) refers to as the "dreamkeepers". These were the teachers who "got it right" for their diverse students. They got it right in terms of developing relationships and pedagogy that enabled their students to be successful. This is an area that warrants further research for our context.

- *What do the practices of the teachers who get it right in Aotearoa New Zealand look like? What can we learn from them?*

Let the discussion begin!

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