CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY HELEN STOKES AND LARISSA MCLEAN DAVIES

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Critical Conversations in Teacher Education: Contemporary Australian Perspectives

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2025

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83608-909-4 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83608-908-7 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83608-910-0 (Epub)

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About the Contributors

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Tom Brunzell (PhD) is the Director of the Berry Street Education Model team and a honorary fellow at the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne. Tom has experience as a teacher, school leader, researcher, and education advisor, and is the Director of Education at Berry Street, Australia. Tom presents internationally on topics of transforming school culture, student engagement, trauma-informed practice, well-being and positive psychology and effective school leadership. His recent book, *Implementing trauma-informed pedagogies for school change: Shifting schools from reactive to proactive*, with co-author Professor Helen Stokes, is available through Emerald Publishing Limited and booksellers worldwide.

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Marian Mahat (PhD) is an Associate Professor of Learning Environments in the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne. She leads sustained and impactful research on learning environments, with an emphasis on the connections between the physical and pedagogical learning environments, spatial competency and literacy, evidence-based teacher-led inquiry and professional learning and the development of teachers across different educational contexts. Working across multiple fields of inquiry, Marian uses innovative quantitative and qualitative methodologies and interdisciplinary collaboration with other universities, industry, school systems and schools.

Sue Mentha (PhD) has worked in the early childhood field for 24 years in preschool and higher education. Sue has taught in the Master of Education and Master of Teaching (ECE) at the Faculty of Education, with a focus on curriculum, pedagogies and social research methods. Recent research interests include Indigenous early childhood education, children's rights, critical ontologies and co-production methodologies of research and collaborations. Sue has held several advisory positions in research and government and is a member of the REEaCh Centre (Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood), University of Melbourne. Sue currently lives and works from Yunbenun, Wulgurukaba Country, North Queensland, which is her children's Traditional Country.

Jane Page OAM (PhD) is a Professor of Education and Associate Director, Pedagogy and Leadership Research in the REEaCh Centre (Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood) in the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne. She has been a teacher of young children and a university academic for

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Vanessa Riley is a passionate design and arts teacher, who has been working in the western suburbs of Melbourne, Australia, for the past decade. As the only Visual Communication Design teacher at Point Cook Senior Secondary College, she has worked independently to build a dynamic, coherent and student-centred programme that scaffolds students for success over their senior secondary schooling. Vanessa's diverse background in multimedia, design and visual art means she has a broad understanding of arts education. She is a champion of lifelong learning, recently completing a minor thesis in artificial intelligence in art and design education.

Pip Robinson (PhD) is the Professional Learning Capstone Coordinator for the Master of Teaching degree at the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne. She has extensive experience teaching at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, and for over 20 years, she led departments in schools, both in Australia and internationally. Pip's research interests revolve around identity development in early-career teachers and music education, through a methodological focus on artography, critical autoethnography and creative non-fiction narrative.

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SWISP Lab's vision is to transform society by mediating complexities that others cannot, using speculative thinking to shape public consciousness in and for education futures amid climate collapse. SWISP (Speculative Wanderings in Space and Place) is an interdisciplinary speculative a/r/tography lab working in

and across pluri-creativities, digital childhoods, digital methods, digital education and digital scholarships in the humanities, arts and social sciences. We entangle our research pathways in this collective to pose questions, break, disrupt and wander with/in multigenerational connected communities.

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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we live, work, and research – the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation whose sovereignty never was and never will be ceded. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were this country's first teachers and researchers. We acknowledge that we have a duty to reflect on how our ways of knowing and being are affected by the colonial ideas we were brought up with, and to seek out Indigenous perspectives so we can learn from them in an attempt to decolonise the research we engage in and work together towards reconciliation.

Drawn from the Acknowledgements of Country written by MTeach Professional Learning Capstone students in 2024

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Introduction

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Mapping Critical Incidents and Conversations in Teacher Education: Global and Local Contexts

The world is facing unprecedented challenges in terms of climate change, sustainability, racial injustice, social and gender inequality, and human wellbeing (United Nations, 2021). Arguably, we have seen these crises magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has drawn these major global issues into sharp relief. For many governments and organisations, education that reflects the principles of peace, sustainability, and social cohesion is a key mechanism for addressing these intractable issues, producing hope for a new way forward, and improving the lives of all people (UNESCO, 2016a; Westheimer, 2020). We see these connections between education and the development of a more active, justice-focussed, and collaborative future fostered not only by policy makers' agendas but also by the actions of the public and students at the heart of these crises. These collective actions in response to the climate crisis, sexual violence against women, and black deaths at the hands of authorities have directly interfaced with education and caused us to recognise the role of education in social transformation and to challenge and reflect on its relevance, purpose and utility, as well as on the role of teacher education.

Students across the globe have participated in School Strike for Climate (n.d.), following the inspiration of Swedish student Greta Thunberg. In 2018, at 15 years old, Thunberg sat in front of the Swedish parliament for three weeks protesting the lack of government action on climate change (Thackeray et al., 2020). While Thunberg's organisation, Fridays for Future, communicated details of the school strikes globally, local SS4C chapters offered resources and presented both a curriculum and apparatus for climate action (School Strike for Climate Australia, n.d.). The United Nations (2021) advises that 'Education is a critical agent in addressing the issue of climate change', and climate education is essential to addressing the climate crisis. Yet the actions of Thunberg and millions of students around the globe suggest that school curricula are not keeping pace with the new knowledge required to ensure the survival of the planet or to produce a sufficiently

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doi:10.1108/978-1-83608-908-720251003

educated public that can pressure governments into action on the climate threat. The return of climate strikes in Melbourne in 2023 drew attention to the perceived continued inaction of politicians, who have condemned the strikes since their inception. Students held placards with slogans such as 'If you were smarter, we'd be in school' (Groch, 2023) and were encouraged by protest organisers to provide a doctor's certificate from a climate scientist for their absence (Chung, 2023). Teachers, grandparents, and parents joined the march associated with the strike, supporting students to abandon school for the day and affirming this out-of-school action as vital for their young peoples' sense of agency about their future (Slezak & Davis, 2023).

Alongside mass student organisations raising issues of the climate crisis, we have also seen young people take action on sexual violence against women. This has occurred in the wake of the global #MeToo movement, initially started in the United States by Tarana Burke (Morris, 2020) and made ubiquitous by Alyssa Milano (Pflum, 2018), who encouraged people to share their experience of sexual harassment via social media. In Australia, activist Chantal Contos launched the Teach Us Consent campaign. This campaign, directed at students, utilised a petition and testimonies of young people who had experienced sexual violence during their school years as a lever to lobby government to consider the mandatory teaching of consent education in schools (Teach Us Consent, n.d.). These political, grassroots actions, again taken by students (Contos's website has garnered more than 6,800 testimonies), undoubtedly influenced the Australian Government's decision to mandate consent education in schools (Elias, 2022). While consent education has been located in the health and physical education areas, recent research has highlighted that consent is arguably a topic that is relevant across curriculum learning areas and needs to be managed through a whole school approach (Burton et al., 2023; Goldberg et al., 2018). In mandated subjects such as English, secondary teachers feel ill-equipped to have the challenging conversations this topic requires (McLean Davies, 2024), and the curriculum offered to students, through texts studied, is out of touch with current understandings of gender diversity, equity, and respect (McLean Davies et al., 2021). Moreover, this suggests that these critical conversations needed in classrooms, as desired by young people, sit uncomfortably within school curricula and require rethinking regarding teacher preparation and education.

Further to this point, protests regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, magnified during the global pandemic following the death of George Floyd in America, have drawn attention to racial inequality and the importance of racial justice and justice education in schools. An extraordinary outcome of the Black Lives Matter protests in Australia in 2020, which focussed on addressing the issue of Aboriginal deaths in custody, was that the stories of First Nations Australians were sold out in bookshops (Heiss, 2020), suggesting that these stories, or histories weren't known, and had not been encountered through formal education. As with the SS4C resources and education materials, many independent and not-for-profit organisations are producing curriculum materials for educational use. This dissonance between the texts, knowledges, and understandings encountered in school through education systems, and the lived experiences of racial injustice by

First Nations Australians was profoundly highlighted through the 2023 referendum, which asked Australians to vote on an amendment to the constitution to enable an Indigenous voice to parliament. While much analysis has been offered as to why this referendum did not reach the required majority, education has been identified as having failed Indigenous Australians prior to the referendum (Keynes et al., 2023), and is also seen as a key mechanism, through decolonising curriculum approaches and imperatives, to advancing justice outcomes in the future (Keynes, 2024). In a way not dissimilar to the example of consent education, research is showing that a key area of focus will need to be teacher preparation and readiness to include First Nations knowledge and histories in the curriculum and employ culturally responsive pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Morrison et al., 2019; Rigney & Hattam, 2024) (see Langley-Freeman et al. chapter here). Non-Indigenous teachers' confidence and competence in decolonising the curriculum and teaching appropriately about First Nations histories and cultures remain a key imperative and challenge in settler contexts such as Australia (Archer-Lean et al., 2024; Phillips et al., 2022).

These critical questions are raised in quite different ways through technology, and through the increasingly pervasive impact of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in schools. AI technologies have been part of all aspects of life, including in educational institutions, for some decades (Kasperski et al., 2022; McKnight, 2021), leading Abblitt (2019) to name our current period as 'postdigital':

> We are increasingly no longer in a world where digital media and technology are separate from, or other to, human and social life. The term "postdigital" has in recent years been applied across a broad range of disciplines…to describe an era in which digital media and technologies have become the dominant, if not hegemonic, aesthetic, social, epistemological and ontological paradigm. (p. 97)

Yet, despite the ubiquitous nature of technologies, including AI technologies, in education, and the role of digital and online learning during the pandemic to sustain schooling in many parts of the world (UNESCO, 2023), the advent of ChatGPT, in November 2022, has shifted the conversation regarding technologies and education irrevocably, provoking a crisis response from governments and school systems. Globally, we saw countries such as the US, China, France, and education systems in Australia move quickly to ban or restrict the use of AI in schools (Hare, 2024; Hsu, 2023). However, with concerns raised about bans being futile (Hare, 2024), other concerns focussed on the bans creating further inequities, as students in advantaged households had access to this technology while those in disadvantaged areas did not (Heffernan et al., 2021). These bans have now been lifted in some state and territories, following guidelines produced by the federal government for responsible and ethical AI usage (AGDE, 2023). Indeed, it is interesting that, by contrast with the previous example of student responses to government action or inaction on major social and environmental issues, the issue of banning AI raised little public outcry. Perhaps this is because the issue is

complex, and goes to issues of pedagogy and assessment rather than content of the curriculum. It is also because people may see the inclusion of these technologies as an inevitable part of our postdigital landscape (see Healy et al. chapter here). Yet, like the major crises and events discussed previously, the rapid expansion of open access to GenAI technologies requires new critical conversations regarding teacher education, teacher knowledge, and the ways in which teaching as a profession is transformed and transforming. This approach sits at odds with recent policy approaches to teacher education in Australia, as presented in the most recent report on the governmental review of teacher education. This report identifies GenAI as part of a technological problem teachers need to manage (along with vaping), rather than the development of an intervention that is fundamentally changing the profession and learning:

> . . .teachers are operating in an environment that is more difficult than at any other time. Schools are at the forefront of managing the impacts of constant changes shaping our society, such as mobile technology, social media, artificial intelligence and vaping. There are greater expectations placed on teachers than ever before. (AGDE, 2023, p. 6)

Each of these examples of major environmental, social, and technological crises and challenges, and the ways they are being experienced particularly by children and young people, points to a further and pervasive social crisis – that of wellbeing. Post-COVID pandemic, wellbeing remains a major social issue (Burke et al., 2021). Students in parts of some countries, such as Victoria in Australia, where many of this book's authors are located, experienced more than 200 days of lockdown, and student wellbeing remains a major issue (Stokes & Brunzell, 2024), with teachers recording unprecedented challenges with supporting the diverse wellbeing and learning needs of students (Flack et al., 2020).

It is evident through this first section of this chapter, that in a world both in crisis and rapid change, education is seen as both part of the problem and the solution. In light of the United Nation (2017)'s sustainable development goal to '[e]nsure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (Goal 4), what critical conversations do we need to have about teacher knowledge, agency, and impact? How do we support teachers engaged in all parts of the education system both initially and throughout their careers? What is the role of teacher educators who prepare and provide ongoing learning for teachers and leaders? As Madalińska-Michalak et al. (2018) put it: 'What should teachers know, and what form of teacher education is best suited in times of uncertainty and instability? How can teacher educators contribute to the education of committed and knowledgeable teachers-to-be?' (p. 567). These questions, as we will show in the following sections, are made exponentially more challenging as a result of specific and sustained workforce and professional crises facing teaching, and the neo-liberal policy foci on teacher education reform that has been enacted throughout the world for the better part of the 20th century (Sahlberg, 2012; Savage, 2016).

The Crises in Teaching and for Schools: Framing Critical Conversations

UNESCO (2016b) articulated the global nature of the teacher shortage and teaching workforce crisis in a report titled: *The world needs almost 69 million new teachers to reach the 2030 education goals* (Welch, 2022; Wiggan et al., 2021). Almost a decade later, we see the impact of nations not adequately taking heed of the crisis, or perhaps understanding the nature of the problem in a way that would enhance the profession, and recruitment and retention into it.

In Australia, where the research in this book takes place, there is a projected deficit of 4,100 secondary school teachers by 2025, which will not be covered by the number of new teacher graduates (AGDE, 2022a). Since 2019, there has been an increase in the number of teachers indicating that they will leave the profession prior to retirement. In part, as we see internationally, this has been exacerbated by the experiences of the COVID pandemic (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023; Flores & Craig, 2023) and decreased working conditions since the pandemic period (Allen et al., 2020). In Australia, the increase has been substantial with 22% in 2019 indicating they would leave, rising to 34% post-COVID lockdowns in 2022 (AITSL, 2024). Since 2020, teachers have cited workload and coping as the most common reason they would leave the profession before retirement age. It was the most common reason for teachers at all stages of their career across rural, regional, and metropolitan areas. In 2020, 87% of teachers in metropolitan areas provided this as the reason, while this increased to 94% of teachers in 2022. Similar figures were recorded for teachers in rural and regional areas (AITSL, 2024).

Prior to COVID, teachers consistently worked above their contracted working hours by up to 15 hours per week (AITSL, 2024). While teachers' work hours have reduced marginally over the last three years, Australian teachers work more hours and for less pay than those with similar qualifications in other OECD countries. This has contributed to their reasons for wanting to leave the profession early. It is well known that persistently long working hours can lead to wellbeing and health issues over time (OECD, 2023a), and the working hours of teachers in Australia are above the OECD average. For example, 'in 2021, teachers taught for 860 hours at primary level, 838 hours at lower-secondary level, and 839 hours at upper secondary level, compared to OECD averages of 784 in primary, 711 in lower secondary, and 684 in upper secondary' (OECD, 2023a, p. 23).

Australian teachers' experiences of feeling unable to cope with their work conditions are confirmed by OECD data, which has found that across all OECD countries, a smaller share of teachers in Australia compared with their OECD peers reported that they were prepared for or felt capable of managing disruptive classroom behaviour (OECD, 2023b, p. 353). PISA student data reporting on the climate in Australian classrooms matched Australian teacher perceptions of challenging classroom behaviour. In a recent study, Australia was ranked 33 out of 37 countries by students for the disciplinary climate in their classrooms (OECD, 2023b, p. 353).

This is a time of challenge for schools and teachers with increasing administrative workloads, parental demands, and challenging student behaviour (AITSL, 2024; OECD, 2023b, p. 353). Students are presenting at school with significant unmet learning and social emotional needs, a trend that has only been exacerbated during COVID (Stokes & Brunzell, 2024). In Australia, of particular importance is the need to support First Nations students and their communities who are experiencing intergenerational trauma (see, e.g., Miller & Berger, 2022). Added to this are incidences of complex trauma that are increasing with ongoing financial insecurity, lack of social connectedness, and a rise in family violence (Wilkins et al., 2021), while a rise in mental health issues is being recorded for both children and young people (Brennan et al., 2021).

Despite the contemporary complexity of teaching while managing a wide range of social issues, Australian teachers have identified that they feel undervalued by the public (see Heffernan et al., 2019). Poor opinion of teachers and teaching has, as Mockler (2020) has shown, been consistently communicated by the media in Australia over decades. Media discourses, reflecting and feeding public perception, have no doubt impacted the decisions of those who might have considered teaching as a profession, and have provided little support for those teachers in service, who are attempting to address the complex needs of students with increased workload and administrative pressures. Although, during the COVID pandemic, teachers in various national contexts were esteemed and valued (for Australian research, see Heffernan et al., 2021), this elevated status of teacher appears short-lived, and the regimes of performativity and managerialism that have caused the progressive de-professionalisation of teaching have proved dominant (Mayer & Mills, 2020).

The teaching workforce shortage has consistently been drawn to the attention of Australian state and federal governments since the 1980s (see Karmel, 1985) and through various independent reports since the turn of the century (see House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training, 2007). However, while the quality and adequacy of pre-service teacher education have been seen as part of the issue of retaining and attracting teachers to the profession for more than four decades (AGDE, 2022a), this aspect of the system has increasingly become the focus of governments and has become a panacea for both workforce and broader educational system issues, including equity of student learning. Indeed, the quality of initial teacher education (ITE), in the context of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) and neoliberal reform, has become the national and public conversation about teacher education, and education more broadly. As Louden (2008) noted, teacher education has been routinely and consistently critiqued in Australia since the 1970s with methodologies that are fundamentally flawed, as they do not disaggregate the 'characteristics of the teacher education students on entry; the characteristics of the initial teacher education (ITE) programs they undertake, and the characteristics of the schools in which they commence practice' (p. 360).

Perceived issues of the quality of ITE programmes have coalesced around concerns about graduate teachers' 'readiness for practice'. This follows the TEMAG (2014) report *Action now: Classroom ready teachers*, and has dominated

policy conversations for the ensuing decade, despite research critiquing the appropriateness and relevance of this concept (see, e.g., Mockler, 2017). As a general point, too, professions do not generally expect new graduates to be as 'ready' as their more experienced colleagues for all the contexts they might encounter. This expectation of universal classroom readiness is made more unrealistic, given the complexity and variability of teaching, schools and students, and the fact that, in order to manage the workforce crisis, all jurisdictions in Australia have implemented policies to enable pre-service teachers to enter into the classroom, unsupervised, from very early in their pre-service degree (VIT, 2023). This creates an obvious tension between notions of careful and thorough preparation for quality of teaching and student learning, and the imperatives for students to have any teacher, no matter how ill prepared, in their classroom.

While the specific focus on professional readiness in teacher education has endured through changing state and federal governments in Australia, the pressing and urgent conditions created by the workforce crisis have resulted in the current federal Minister for Education, Jason Clare, mobilising education ministers across states and territories to develop a National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (AGDE, 2022b). This action plan has five priority areas including attraction, initial training, retention, elevating the profession, and future workforce planning. This plan gestures to the whole of the career of the teacher and moves beyond the notion of ITE being the sole period in which teachers become 'ready' for the profession.

Yet, review of the action plan, which notes current federal and state policy initiatives to attract and retain teachers, indicates governments are seeking to largely work within the current system, offering financial incentives to teach in hard-to staff locations (AGDE, 2022a), and in stages of schooling or disciplines where there are major shortages. Other approaches are to give either time or financial recompense for administrative and professional responsibilities, such as mentoring (Roberts & Downes, 2020). There is a sense of trying to provide the necessary glue to a system that is broken and bursting, without perhaps a full analysis and understanding of some of the root causes that are fracturing the system in the first place (see chapter by Cuervo for a discussion of this in rural areas). The strategy of mitigating challenging teaching contexts with remuneration does not address the more general issue of teacher pay, career progression, support, and flexibility, as recommended in research such as that undertaken by Longmuir et al. (2024). This focus on solving the immediate issue with short-term intervention draws attention to the limited efficacy of a triage response to the workforce crisis. While consideration is given for the imperative to develop a more diverse workforce, which is linked, as Rice et al. (2023) argue, to issues of attraction and retention, fundamental changes to schools and systems are not mooted. In other jurisdictions, such as Arizona in the US, responses to the workforce crisis have resulted in an essential review of the work of teachers, with more collaborative, focussed, and specialised preparation and careers (see Arizona State University, 2023), shifting critical conversations to solutions beyond current paradigms. It is worth noting that in the Next Education

Workforce developed in Arizona, school–university partnerships are valued beyond the initial phase, which is how they are characterised in the recent Australian National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (AGDE, 2022b). Universities and research have a fundamental role, in partnerships with governments and local councils, in shaping the profession of the future (Longmuir et al., 2024).

Critical Conversations in Teacher Education: About This Book

In this spirit of generating new and critical conversations in teacher education and teaching as a profession, we have produced this book. While being generated amid a teaching workforce crisis, *Critical conversations in teacher education: Contemporary australian perspectives*, seeks to showcase collaborative research, often with schools, systems, and governments, that show teacher education across the career, and the vital role of teacher education and educators in collaboratively reimaging the profession. The research presented covers a wide range of settings, from early childhood through to primary and secondary settings, and explores a wide range of topics of interest to educators both in schools and at a system level, offering valuable considerations for shaping the future of the teaching profession. For us, 'teacher education' is defined as learning across the lifespan of teaching, as both ITE and in-service professional learning. We discuss how current research is addressing some of these issues and provides a way forward for educators who work in both ITE and in-service teacher education. This includes insights into attempts to improve the retention of quality teachers in the classroom through an elevation of the status of the teacher and recognition of their professional expertise and status. With increasing diversity and complex issues affecting school communities, teachers must be supported to create space for meaningful, ongoing professional learning to contextualise research into their professional practice. This calls for a re-evaluation of teaching practices and pedagogical approaches as educators face critical junctures such as the epoch of the Anthropocene, characterised by humanity's significant impact on Earth's systems, and the impact of GenAI (see Coleman et al. chapter for discussion). Further research focusses on strategies to assist classroom teachers and school-based practitioners to meet the complex behavioural, cognitive, and relational needs of all students in schools while placing at the centre the foundational rights, needs, and strengths of diverse students and families. This will, in turn, ensure our educational systems can move towards becoming active sites of cultural inclusion and structural healing.

A diverse range of authors are reflected in this collection. While most are part of the Melbourne Teacher Education Group in the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, we also draw on the expertise of our industry partners to reflect a range of perspectives in research, teaching, and professional practice. The authors start with the challenges for teacher education across the lifespan but provide very different perspectives on how to work with these challenges as they discuss critical conversations in teacher education across the sectors, from early childhood to primary and secondary education then into tertiary education and ITE.