Tensions and Futures in Teacher Education: A Critical Discussion

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Abstract

Teacher education has long been positioned as a central lever for improving educational quality, often as though the relationship between preparation and outcomes were straightforward. Drawing on the author's research and engagement with the field, this article critically examines the tensions shaping teacher education today and the uncertain futures these tensions may be producing. The discussion encompasses theoretical and policy framings of teacher education; comparative insights from twelve countries; teachers' reflections, based on TALIS data, on their preparedness, teaching practices, and professional learning needs; a systematic review of empirical evidence on the effects of teacher preparation; reform movements in low- and middle-income contexts; and contemporary scholarly and discursive shifts that are redefining the purposes of teacher education. Across these strands, the article argues that, although the field is characterised by substantial policy and scholarly activity, the evidence base remains fragile and the direction of change unclear. Rather than resolving longstanding challenges, current trajectories may intensify them. The article concludes by emphasising the need for a shared, future-oriented vision of teacher education that can contribute meaningfully to quality education for future generations.

Keywords*: teacher education, quality education, futures of teacher education.*

Introduction

Teacher education occupies a prominent yet contested position in contemporary education policy. Governments and international organisations frequently present teacher preparation as a central mechanism for improving teaching quality, student learning, and educational equity. At the same time, as the world approaches the 2030 deadline for Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), teacher education is increasingly shaped by standardisation, accountability, alternative certification, licensure, and demands for demonstrable impact. These developments have intensified longstanding questions about what teacher education is expected to accomplish, how its quality should be judged, and

whether the outcomes attributed to it can reasonably be produced through pre-service preparation alone.

International scholarship has examined this debate from several complementary perspectives. First, comparative research has identified common features of well-developed teacher education systems, including coherent curricula, clinical experience, and connections between theory and practice (Darling-Hammond, 2017). However, evidence on the relationship between teacher preparation and subsequent teacher or student outcomes remains heterogeneous, partly because studies differ in programme design, outcome measures, and research methods (Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; König et al., 2024). In addition, policy scholarship has questioned the international circulation of teacher education reforms, particularly the tendency to transfer apparently successful models without sufficient attention to their political, institutional, and cultural contexts (Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). Meanwhile, social justice scholarship has challenged conceptions of teacher education centred narrowly on technical competence, calling instead for greater attention to inequality, professional judgement, identity, and democratic purposes (Zeichner, 2009).

Although these discussions provide important insights, they frequently examine programme structures, teacher outcomes, policy reform, and normative purposes as separate domains. Consequently, there remains insufficient understanding of how these domains interact to generate contradictory expectations for teacher education. This can result in systems adopting similar professional standards and qualification structures while providing substantially different opportunities for teachers to develop judgement, autonomy, and context-responsive practice. Teachers may perceive themselves as formally prepared while also identifying needs in inclusive education, digital pedagogy, and work with diverse learners. Similarly, policy frameworks may attribute improvements in teaching and learning to formal preparation, even though empirical evidence suggests that its influence is mediated by induction, mentoring, working conditions, school leadership, and continuing professional learning.

This discussion paper addresses this gap by bringing together policy, comparative, empirical, and contextual evidence to examine the tensions shaping contemporary teacher education. Rather than treating programme structures, teacher perspectives, impact evidence, and reform movements as separate debates, the paper analyses them in relation to one another and asks what kinds of futures are being produced for teacher education and whether these futures are adequate to the wider aspirations of quality, equity, and professional responsibility.

Analytical Approach and Sources of Evidence

This article is a critical discussion paper organised around five interconnected components of the author's doctoral work on teacher education. These components are used as complementary analytical lenses rather than combined as a single empirical dataset.

First, the paper critically examines international policy and theoretical claims concerning teacher quality, professionalisation, and the contribution of teacher education to educational improvement. Second, it draws on a comparative mapping of initial teacher education programmes across twelve countries to identify similarities and differences in programme structures, practicum, professional standards, and routes into teaching. Third, it analyses TALIS 2018 data from six of these countries, aligned with the mapping component, to examine teachers' reported preparedness, teaching practices, and professional learning needs (OECD, 2019). Fourth, it incorporates findings from a systematic review of 23 empirical studies examining the relationship between teacher preparation and teacher and student outcomes. Fifth, it uses teacher education reform in Pakistan as a contextual case through which to explore policy borrowing, professionalisation, and local relevance.

The discussion brings these components into conversation around five recurring tensions: normative aspiration versus empirical evidence; structural convergence versus contextual diversity; formal qualification versus professional competence; accountability versus professional judgement; and global policy mobility versus local relevance. The analysis is therefore interpretive and conceptual. Its purpose is not to establish causal relationships but to explain the contradictions shaping contemporary teacher education and its possible futures.

Theoretical and Normative Foundations

Globally, teachers are widely recognised as central to education systems. The influential McKinsey report popularised the assertion that "the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers" (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, p. 16), drawing causal conclusions from descriptive correlations in high-performing PISA systems. Although rhetorically powerful, this assertion rests on a thin evidentiary foundation. It elevates teacher quality as the primary determinant of system performance while overlooking the structural, political, and socioeconomic conditions that shape both teaching and learning. The appeal of this message lies in its simplicity, but its simplicity is precisely the problem: it reduces complex educational ecosystems to a single variable and positions teacher education as the obvious solution.

International policy frameworks reinforce this emphasis. The ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers (International Labour Organization [ILO] & United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1966) asserts that teaching requires specialised knowledge and that entry into the profession should require completion of an approved teacher education programme. However, this recommendation reflects a professionalisation agenda rather than empirical evidence that formal pre-service preparation improves teaching or student learning. The problem arises when such normative claims are treated as research-based evidence and adopted as blueprints for reform. In doing so, they blur the distinction between aspiration and evidence and create expectations that teacher education cannot realistically meet on its own.

SDG 4 amplifies this normative emphasis by calling for an increased supply of "qualified teachers", typically defined through formal credentials. This framing risks equating credentialling with competence, despite critiques that the global indicator for "qualified teachers" narrows the target to certification and training measures that do not adequately represent teachers' broader professional capacities (Rose & Sayed, 2024). The Global report on teachers cites a projected shortage of 44 million primary and secondary teachers by 2030 and reinforces calls to strengthen the profession (UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024). Yet aggregate shortage estimates can obscure diverse causes, including poor working conditions, migration, conflict, and retention challenges, and can encourage advocacy claims that exceed the available causal evidence. The narrative that "more training will fix the problem" persists even when the evidence base remains inconclusive.

Three possible explanations for inconclusive evidence on teacher education should not be conflated. First, some forms of teacher education may have limited effects. Second, inconclusiveness may reflect the methodological difficulty of isolating the effects of preparation from those of induction, mentoring, school conditions, and continuing professional learning. Third, dominant measures of impact may be too narrow to capture what teacher education contributes. Inconclusive evidence concerning student outcomes, therefore, does not necessarily mean that preparation lacks value. Rather, teacher education's contribution may be conditional, multidimensional, and more visible in professional knowledge, judgement, and preparedness than in short-term measures of student attainment.

In summary, these theoretical and normative foundations create a powerful but problematic storyline: teacher education is positioned as both the cause of and the solution to system-level challenges. This simplistic narrative shapes global expectations, drives

national reforms, and places an ever-expanding burden on teacher education systems, often without the empirical grounding needed to justify such weight.

Teacher Education Programmes across Twelve Countries

Strengthening teacher quality is central to the ambitions of SDG 4, yet countries organise teacher preparation in noticeably different ways. The twelve countries considered in the systematic mapping, including Brazil, Colombia, Egypt, England, Finland, India, Kenya, Malaysia, Pakistan, Poland, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa, differ in economic context, governance arrangements, institutional capacity, professional traditions, and routes into teaching. The purpose of the comparison is therefore not to treat them as a uniform group or to imply that similar programme features have the same meaning across settings. Rather, the comparison examines how common reform ideas appear in different national contexts.

The mapping identified several recurring features across these systems, including professional standards, theory-practice components, supervised practicum, and multiple qualification pathways (Ansari, 2026a). At first glance, these features suggest a degree of structural convergence in teacher education. However, closer comparison shows that similar terminology can represent quite different practices. For example, practicum may operate as an extended and carefully mentored process of professional learning in some contexts, whereas in others it may remain a shorter programme requirement with limited opportunities for guided reflection or independent practice. Similarly, research engagement, assessment of readiness to teach, and the professional autonomy afforded to beginning teachers vary considerably across systems.

This convergence should therefore be interpreted cautiously. It may reflect shared learning about teacher preparation, but it may also be shaped by international policy influence, professionalisation agendas, accreditation requirements, and the symbolic appeal of globally recognisable reform language. Standards, practicum, qualification routes, and accountability mechanisms often travel across systems as markers of quality, but their educational value depends on how they are enacted within particular institutional and professional conditions. In this sense, convergence in programme architecture does not necessarily indicate convergence in pedagogical depth, mentoring quality, or contextual relevance.

The comparison thus points to a central tension between structural convergence and contextual diversity. Countries may adopt similar policy language and formal requirements while offering different opportunities for teachers to develop professional judgement, pedagogical competence, and context-responsive practice. The value of the comparative evidence lies not in producing universally applicable conclusions but in showing that teacher education models cannot be understood apart from the systems in which they are located.

This is why the later discussion of Pakistan is important: it illustrates how internationally circulating ideas may be adopted, adapted, and reinterpreted within national reform conditions.

Teacher Reflections from Six Countries

To complement the comparative mapping of teacher education structures across twelve countries, this section draws on TALIS 2018 data from six countries included in that mapping: Brazil, Colombia, England, Finland, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa (OECD, 2019). Whereas the mapping examines how teacher education is formally organised, the TALIS analysis adds teachers' perspectives on their preparation, entry into the profession, classroom practices, and professional learning needs. The two components are therefore read together to examine whether differences in programme structures are reflected in teachers' reported experiences.

The data reveal substantial variation in teacher education pathways and perceived preparedness. Finland and Brazil rely predominantly on concurrent programmes, whereas England relies more heavily on consecutive routes; Colombia, South Africa, and Saudi Arabia show more mixed patterns. These differences are accompanied by variation in entry motivations. For example, teaching was reported as a first-choice career by 83% of teachers in Saudi Arabia, compared with 51% in South Africa, suggesting that programme structures operate within different professional and labour-market contexts.

Teachers' reported preparedness also varies across countries. Finnish teachers reported comparatively lower levels of preparedness on several indicators, although this should not be taken automatically as evidence of weaker preparation because self-assessments may also reflect differing professional expectations and response patterns. Across the six countries, reported gaps were particularly evident in technology integration, multicultural teaching, and educating students with special educational needs. These areas also featured prominently in teachers' professional development needs, indicating possible discontinuities between formal preparation and the changing demands of classroom practice.

Relational teaching practices were reported more positively across the six systems, whereas technology-supported and inquiry-oriented practices appeared less consistently embedded. However, these patterns cannot be attributed to programme design alone, as they may also reflect teaching experience, school culture, access to resources, and opportunities for continuing professional learning.

The TALIS findings should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously. They describe patterns in teachers' reported experiences but do not establish that particular programme

structures caused differences in preparedness or classroom practice. These patterns may be influenced by professional expectations, cultural response tendencies, career stage, and teachers' subsequent workplace experiences. The findings are therefore used here as evidence of perceived continuities and discontinuities between preparation and professional practice rather than as direct measures of programme effectiveness.

When considered alongside the twelve-country mapping, the TALIS findings reinforce the distinction between formal programme architecture and teachers' lived professional experience. Similar programme structures do not necessarily produce similar perceptions of preparedness or classroom practice, whereas different pathways may generate overlapping professional learning needs. Teachers' reflections therefore complement the structural comparison by showing how teacher education is experienced within diverse national and institutional contexts.

Evidence on Impact of Teacher Education

The systematic review of 23 empirical studies found that the evidence available for judging the effects of teacher preparation was of generally low to moderate quality. In this context, evidence quality refers to the extent to which study designs could support credible inferences about the contribution of preparation. Common limitations included small or context-specific samples, reliance on self-reported outcomes, weak or absent comparison groups, limited controls for prior characteristics, and substantial variation in the outcomes examined. Few studies were able to distinguish the effects of formal preparation from those of school context and experience, and none considered teacher selection as a potential confounding factor.

The inconclusive findings should not therefore be interpreted simply as evidence of limited effectiveness. They reflect both the conditional nature of teacher education and the methodological difficulty of studying this relationship. Preparation is not a detached intervention delivered under controlled conditions; it is an early component of professional learning whose effects interact with mentoring, leadership, workload, curriculum, school resources, and opportunities to practise. Moreover, its influence may be more readily observed in proximal outcomes, such as professional knowledge, confidence, and preparedness, than in student attainment, which is shaped by many additional factors.

The synthesis found the most consistent evidence in relation to professional knowledge and perceived preparedness. Evidence concerning changes in classroom practice and student learning was more uneven. This pattern suggests neither that teacher education is inconsequential nor that all forms of preparation are equally effective. Rather, it indicates that current research does not yet permit reliable identification of which programme

components matter, for whom, under what institutional conditions, and through which mechanisms.

These findings challenge the persistent assumption that simply expanding or extending pre-service preparation will automatically improve educational quality. Instead, they point to a more complex reality: teacher education can contribute meaningfully to foundational competence, but its influence is contingent, mediated, and often overshadowed by the environments in which teachers work. This raises a critical question for the future: are we expecting teacher education to deliver outcomes that no pre-service programme could realistically achieve on its own?

Reform Movements: The Case of Pakistan

Across many education systems, teacher education reforms have sought to professionalise teaching through extended programmes, professional standards, specialised pathways, and licensure systems. Pakistan provides a useful case for examining how such reforms are adopted and reworked within a specific national context. Over the past two decades, Pakistan has introduced several reforms, including the four-year B.Ed. (Hons.) programme, the National Professional Standards for Teachers, revised teacher education curricula, and, more recently, provincial teacher licensure initiatives (Government of Sindh, 2023; Higher Education Commission, 2010, 2025; Government of Pakistan, 2009). At the level of policy design, these reforms appear to align teacher education with international expectations of professionalism, accountability, and quality. However, their implementation raises important questions about how teacher quality is understood and how far structural reform can improve the everyday practice of teaching.

A central issue is that many reforms have drawn legitimacy from internationally circulating models rather than from a strong local evidence base on what improves teaching in Pakistani classrooms. Longer initial teacher education programmes, for example, assume that additional coursework will strengthen professional competence, yet programme duration alone does not necessarily improve preparedness or classroom practice. Similarly, licensure may be presented as a mechanism for assuring teacher quality, but in practice it may reduce professional competence to what can be assessed through standardised formats. This is particularly problematic in contexts where teachers work in overcrowded classrooms, with limited resources, weak mentoring systems, and difficult working conditions.

The Pakistan case also shows that policy borrowing is not a simple process of replication. International reform ideas are selected, translated, and layered onto existing national and provincial arrangements. As a result, reforms may retain the language of global professionalisation while serving different local functions. Professional standards may

become compliance documents rather than tools for professional learning; extended degrees may increase formal qualification requirements without strengthening clinical practice; and licensure may operate more as an additional recruitment threshold than as part of a broader system of induction, mentoring, and continuing development.

This reveals a wider pattern of structural expansion without sufficient pedagogical depth. The architecture of teacher education has become more elaborate, with more credits, requirements, specialisations, and regulatory mechanisms, but the substance of preparation has not necessarily changed commensurately (Ansari, 2026b). Practicum experiences often remain limited; mentoring arrangements are inconsistent; and local knowledge, multilingual realities, and community-based pedagogies receive insufficient attention. Moreover, reforms have often been introduced without adequately addressing the wider conditions that shape teachers' work, including salaries, career progression, political interference, institutional capacity, and chronic underfunding.

Pakistan is therefore best understood not as an exception but as an illustrative case of a broader reform dilemma. Its experience shows how well-intentioned policies may become misaligned when they prioritise global legitimacy over local relevance or assume that more structure will automatically produce better teaching. The central lesson is that professionalisation cannot be achieved through formal architecture alone. Without contextual grounding, investment in teacher educators, meaningful practicum, sustained mentoring, and attention to teachers' working realities, reform movements may intensify existing challenges rather than resolve them.

Contemporary Discourse in Teacher Education

The preceding discussion highlights a persistent mismatch between the expanding expectations placed on teacher education and the limited evidence that structural reform alone improves teaching or student learning. Recent scholarship offers an alternative way of approaching this problem by shifting attention from programme architecture and measurable outcomes towards the deeper purposes of teacher education. Keynote contributions presented at the BERA TEAN 2026 conference foregrounded professional judgement, contextual responsiveness, justice, and belonging as central to the future of the field.

Burn's (2026) account of practical theorising speaks directly to the tension between accountability and professional judgement. Rather than preparing beginning teachers merely to implement prescribed methods, teacher education should enable them to interpret research, policy, and classroom experience in relation to one another. This requires the development of intellectual and ethical judgement, particularly in contexts characterised by

uncertainty, diversity, and the growing influence of prescriptive curricula and artificial intelligence.

Vanassche's (2026) critique of policy mobility similarly reinforces the tension between global reform models and local relevance. Widely circulating approaches, including accelerated routes and narrowly defined evidence-based interventions, may acquire authority because they appear successful elsewhere. However, their transfer can obscure differences in institutional capacity, professional traditions, and educational purposes. This argument resonates with the discussion of Pakistan, where structural reforms have often drawn legitimacy from international models without equivalent attention to local conditions of implementation.

McIntyre's (2026) emphasis on belonging extends the discussion beyond formal inclusion. Using refugee education as a lens, she positions belonging as an ethical and pedagogical foundation for teacher education, requiring teachers to engage with exclusion, identity, relationships, and unequal participation. This perspective challenges systems in which inclusion is treated as an additional competency rather than as a principle shaping the entire process of professional preparation.

These concerns are also reflected in contemporary debates about what teacher education is ultimately for. A call for a 2026 special issue of the Asia Pacific Journal of Teacher Education questions policy vocabularies centred narrowly on supply, credentials, effectiveness, and impact and invites greater attention to flourishing, the common good, Indigenous knowledge, civic responsibility, and resistance. Such perspectives do not reject evidence or professional competence; rather, they broaden the criteria through which teacher education is understood and evaluated.

These contemporary perspectives also provide substantive responses to the tensions identified earlier. Practical theorising responds to the tension between accountability and professional judgement by positioning teachers as interpreters rather than implementers of knowledge. Policy mobility scholarship clarifies why structural convergence may coexist with weak contextual fit. Belonging and justice challenge the reduction of professional competence to credentials or measurable performance by foregrounding the relational and ethical dimensions of teaching. Collectively, these discussions do not constitute a separate agenda from questions of evidence and effectiveness; they broaden the understanding of what effective preparation should enable teachers to know, judge, and do.

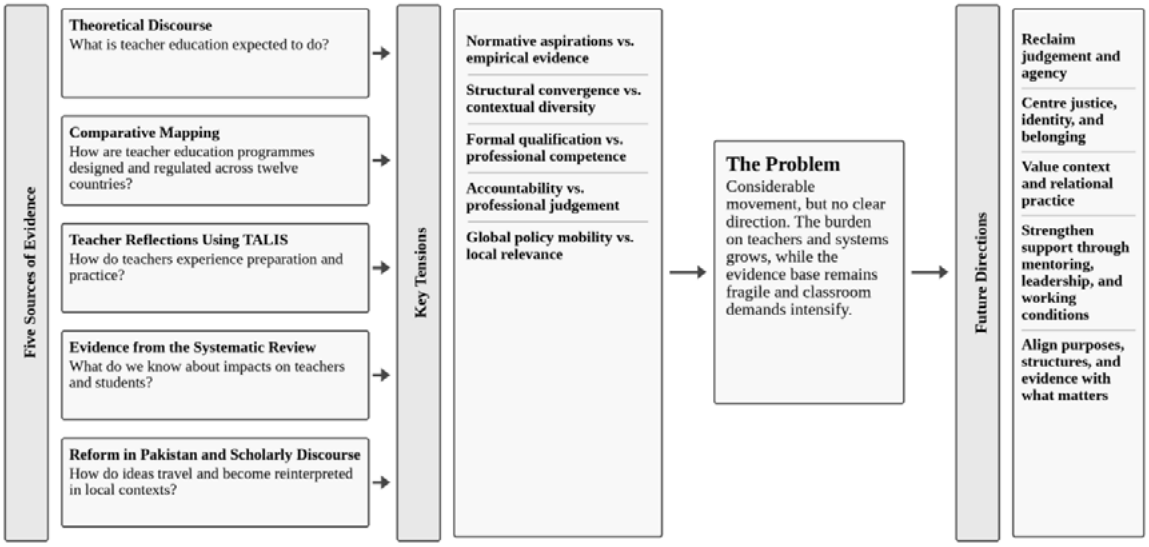
In summary, this contemporary scholarship suggests that the future of teacher education should not be framed as a choice between professional competence and broader educational purposes. Instead, it calls for a model in which knowledge, practice, and evidence are connected to judgement, justice, belonging, and contextual responsibility. This

reorientation aligns with the central argument of this paper: teacher education cannot be strengthened through structural expansion or standardisation alone. Its future depends equally on clarity of purpose, responsiveness to context, and recognition of the professional and ethical agency of teachers.

Conclusion

As summarised in Figure 1, the central problem facing teacher education is not simply whether programmes should be expanded, standardised, or reformed, but whether the field has sufficient clarity about the purposes those reforms are intended to serve. Much current policy activity assumes that stronger structures will produce better teaching. This paper has questioned that assumption by showing that teacher education operates within a wider professional and institutional ecology. Its influence cannot be separated from the conditions in which teachers are prepared, inducted, supported, and expected to work.

Figure 1: *Summary of tensions and futures of teacher education*



The analysis suggests that teacher education should not be treated as an isolated policy instrument or as a technical solution to system-level problems. Its contribution is necessarily conditional. It can strengthen professional knowledge, judgement, and preparedness, but these capacities are sustained or weakened by mentoring, leadership, workload, resources, professional autonomy, and opportunities for continued learning. Evaluating teacher education only through credentials, programme duration, or student outcomes therefore risks attributing either too much responsibility or too little value to preparation.

The future of teacher education cannot, therefore, be secured through structural expansion alone. A more coherent and defensible future requires purposeful alignment among programme design, evidence, professional learning, and the wider conditions of teachers' work. It also requires a clear conception of teaching as intellectual, relational, and ethical practice. Importantly, contextual responsiveness, justice, belonging, and professional judgement should not be treated as additional aspirations to be added after technical competence has been secured; they are part of what competent teaching entails.

The field therefore resembles a dark room: there is considerable movement but no consistently clear direction. Reforms, standards, licensure systems, alternative routes, international models, and new accountability mechanisms continue to appear, yet their purposes are often insufficiently examined and only superficially aligned. In such conditions, reform ideas can resemble arrows released with urgency but without a shared target. They may generate activity, but activity should not be mistaken for progress.

A shared vision for teacher education is therefore needed, but it should not become another universal blueprint. The distinction between shared purposes and standardised means is crucial. Teacher education systems may share commitments to intellectually rigorous preparation, ethical and relational practice, inclusion, professional judgement, and contextual responsiveness while pursuing these commitments through different institutional forms. Such a vision would establish guiding principles without converting them into a decontextualised model to be transferred across systems.

Developing this vision requires dialogue among teachers, teacher educators, learners, communities, researchers, and policymakers. It also requires a clearer distribution of responsibility. Teacher education can establish important foundations for professional practice, but governments and schools remain responsible for induction, mentoring, working conditions, resources, and continuing professional learning. The critical task is therefore not to search for another reform blueprint but to clarify what teacher education is for what it can reasonably achieve, and what wider responsibilities must be carried by education systems if teachers are to teach well.

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