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**Developing Teacher competence  
and Professionalism in Northern  
Ireland: An analysis of 'Teaching:  
The Reflective Profession'  
(GTCNI, 2007)**

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**Abstract**

This paper considers the development of teacher professionalism in the context of Northern Ireland. The paper traces the development of the discourse on teacher education in the UK and, through an analysis of 'Teaching: The Reflective Profession' (GTCNI, 2007), suggests that teacher development in NI is characterised by its individuality and difference in approach to that of the rest of the UK. It proposes that teacher education in NI rejects the technical rational model of teacher competence in favour of one which promotes critically reflective, activist teachers. The paper also identifies a range of factors which mitigate the actualisation of reflection, partnership and effective collaboration becoming fully embedded across the phases of the profession.

**Key words**

Teacher education; professionalism; competence; reflective practice.

**Introduction**

Educational standards and their influence upon social and economic development have been a key concern of successive governments in the United Kingdom [UK] since the 1970s (DfES, 1985; DfEE, 1997; DfEE, 2001; DfES, 2004; DfE, 2010). The focus on the relationship between education and society has inevitably led to scrutiny being levelled on teachers and teacher professionalism. Furlong (2005) charts a move from teacher autonomy in the 1970s, through to what he refers to as 'managed professionalism' under the New Labour government from the late 1990s onwards. He suggests that with New Labour, there was a continuation of the neo-conservative and neo-liberal reforms of the previous Conservative governments. These had moved the teaching profession towards centralised control and homogeneity in relation to curriculum and pedagogy, and introduced new challenges of managerialism (The Office for Standards in Education [Ofsted]; the Teacher Training Agency [TTA]) and market control upon educational practice at all levels. In addition, the challenge for New Labour was to ensure that the emergent demands of knowledge-based economies and increasing globalisation were also met whilst at the same time pursuing social democratic ideals and inclusion practices, to promote 'social reflexivity'

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necessary for a modern 'active' state (Giddens, 1994:16; 2000:7).

Alongside this evolving agenda and 'new professionalism' (DfEE, 1998:9) for teachers, the past forty years has also seen significant consideration given to the nature and purpose of teacher education and preparation. Governments, of both political persuasions have been heavily influenced by 'New Right' ideological notions (Cox and Dyson, 1971; O' Hear, 1988; The Hillgate Group, 1989; Lawlor, 1990) that teacher education has traditionally perpetuated a liberalist agenda which is out of touch with parents, employers and the demands of contemporary society both locally and globally. The twin strands of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism have resulted in profound changes to the process of teacher education. From a neo-liberal perspective, there has been a systematic thrust towards deregulation with deliberate attempts to move teacher education out of colleges and universities and into schools (DES, 1992; HMI 1991; DfE, 2010). Alongside this, there have been clear policy directives to ensure the recruitment of individuals from a variety of different backgrounds on an apprenticeship basis for work in schools (DfES, 1989a; DfE, 2010). From a neo-conservative perspective, there has been a move away from the notion of 'teacher education' towards 'teacher training' and increasing centralisation and prescription of what the content of initial teacher training courses should involve (DfES, 1984; 1989b; 1989c).

A natural development from this was the emergence of a competence-based approach, the intention of which was to provide a clear indication of what teachers should actually be able to *do* at the end of their training programme (DfE, 1992). There are essentially two perspectives on the use of competences in teacher education. The first states that they have value as they are directly concerned with practice which can be developed deductively by identifying effective behaviours and strategies which can be replicated (Norris, 1991; Lester, 1995). A second perspective however is that the use of competences can lead to reductivist, technical-rationality which denies the importance of critical reflection and knowledge which informs practice (Pring, 1992; Carr, 1993; Hargreaves, 2003). The approach is rejected on the grounds that it 'encourages an over-emphasis on skills and techniques; that it ignores vital components of teacher education; that what informs performance is as important as performance itself; and that the whole is more than the sum of the parts' (Whitty and Willmott, 1991:310).

### **The case of Northern Ireland**

Although education policy in Northern Ireland [NI] has traditionally emulated that in the rest of the UK, teacher education is demarcated differently. Teacher education in NI began to change in the early 1990s following the publication of Circular 9/92 (DfE, 1992) in Great Britain [GB] with its requirements for increased partnership and involvement of schools in teacher training. The

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Northern Ireland Teacher Education Committee [NITEC] which was established in 1994, played a very significant role in ensuring that the extent to which the requirements of Circular 9/92 (DfE, 1992) had been implemented in England, did not take place in NI. Relationships between the HEIs and schools in NI had traditionally been strong, due in large part to the history of the province and to the dual nature of the school system which was reflected in the teacher education structures (Hagan, 2003; Montgomery and Smith, 2006). As a result of this, teachers did not see the need to accept the significant responsibilities which would be placed upon them if the full extent of the conditions of Circular 9/92 (DfE, 1992) were to be implemented (Moran, 1998).

In 1998, NITEC published the 'Teacher Education Partnership Handbook' (NITEC and CEPD, 1998) which articulated an integrated teacher partnership model consisting of three phases: Initial Teacher Education [ITE]; Induction; and Early Professional Development [EPD]. The model allocated various competencies to the different phases of teacher development and provided an indication of the key partner (Higher Education Institutions [HEIs], schools, employers etc.) best placed to promote the development of the competence in that particular phase. This approach represented a desire for distinctiveness and independence from teacher education policy in the rest of the UK as well as pragmatism in relation to how policy should be implemented in the NI context.

It was against this background that the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland [GTCNI] was established under the auspices of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (Part 4: Chapter 1). In 2005, the GTCNI was asked by DENI to 'examine and produce recommendations on the continued appropriateness of the teacher competences model, including the balance between Higher Education Institution (HEI) and school-based education in both PGCE and BEd courses' (GTCNI, 2005:10). The major recommendations made by the GTCNI were that: the competence statements should be reduced from ninety two to twenty seven; the existing three phases of the professional development model should be extended to include Continuing Professional Development [CPD] and that CPD should be regarded as an entitlement for all serving teachers; two professional milestones of Chartered Teacher and Advanced Chartered Teacher status should be recognised; and there would be a new Code of values and Professional Practice which should be incorporated into the competence framework. What emerged was 'Teaching: The Reflective Profession' (GTCNI, 2007).

This paper considers the extent to which the GTCNI statement of competences (GTCNI, 2007), manages to address the contrasting narratives outlined by Ozga (2000:44) as the 'struggle for teacher autonomy and responsibility in a 'social justice' project, set against the modernising, economising project for teachers that seeks to guarantee their efficiency by enhancing their flexibility and encouraging them to accept standardised forms of practice'. The paper examines

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the potential of the GTCNI competences to promote the development of 'professional regeneration' and critically, reflective 'extended' professionals (Hoyle and John, 1995; Hoyle, 1974; Carr, 1993), who are 'activist' teachers, working in partnership with others on the basis of 'active trust' (Giddens, 1994:14).

### **Teaching: The Reflective Profession**

In 'Teaching: The Reflective Profession' (GTCNI 2007) the GTCNI present their model of the 'Reflective and Activist Practitioner' and their 'Code of Values and Professional Practice'. There is also a section dedicated to 'Teaching in the Knowledge Society and Economy' and an annex which outlines the 'Council's Charter for Education'. The twenty seven competences are set out under three headings: 'Professional Values and Practice'; 'Professional Knowledge and Understanding'; 'Professional Skills and Application' to include 'Planning and Leading', 'Teaching and Learning' and 'Assessment'.

Ozga, (2000: 95) suggests that policy texts may be analysed in terms of the messages they convey regarding:

- *The source of the policy*: whose interests it serves; its relationship to global, national and local imperatives.
- *The scope of the policy*: what it is assumed it is able to do; how it frames the issues; the policy relationships embedded within it.
- *The pattern of the policy*: what it builds on or alters in terms of relationships, what organisational and institutional changes or developments it requires.

Ozga suggests that a framework of questions or 'text analysis protocol' (pg. 99) should be developed for text analysis. The questions posed by Ozga provide a useful framework upon which to build an analysis of the competence document given that the issues of source, scope and pattern are directly related to the focus of this paper i.e. the nature and development of teacher professionalism. Using Ozga's framework, the GTCNI competence document is analysed in relation to three central issues which emerge from the text: the nature and purpose of education; teaching as a professional activity; relationships and power.

#### *The nature and purpose of education – The source of the policy*

The purpose of the document is set out in Section 2 where the GTCNI state that,

...for the first time, a comprehensive discourse which sets out the ethical basis and moral purposes of our work, as well as a clear understanding of the practice of teaching. In providing a common framework and language it will facilitate discussion and allow for teachers, acting in communities of

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practice, to more readily share experiences and understandings about the complex and value-laden process of education (GTCNI, 2007:6).

This 'discourse' articulates three things. Firstly, there is an emphasis on the values and moral imperative underpinning the work of teachers (Pring, 1992; Carr, 1993; Reynolds and Salters, 1998; Hargreaves, 2003). Secondly though, there is a clear intention to provide clarity in 'the practice of teaching' thus dispelling the notion of teaching as something which is intangible and based on tacit knowledge alone. Allied to this, there is reference to the idea of teachers working not as autonomous individuals, but working in 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998). Thirdly, to facilitate this necessary engagement, the GTCNI wishes to provide a 'common language' to make explicit the 'knowledge, skills and values that teachers should exemplify' (GTCNI:2007: 6). The GTCNI is attempting to balance the demands for clarity and transparency (DfE, 1992) with the interests of a profession which they believe should be based on values. Teacher autonomy and responsibility is still a central theme here, but in a different, more democratic form, based on collaboration and 'community' practice.

In addition to aspiring to serve the interests of both government and the teaching profession, the GTCNI competence framework outlines its position in relation to the role of education within society. In the 'Code of Values and Professional Practice', it states that,

The importance to society of the process of schooling and the work of teachers should not be underestimated. Indeed, education lies at the heart of both social and economic progress. It empowers and celebrates; it shapes society and effectively secures future well-being (GTCNI, 2007:44).

This theme is developed in the 'Charter for Education' where the GTCNI outline their understanding of the nature and purpose of education. They state that if the importance of education to society is acknowledged, then this

...leads inevitably to the recognition that:

- education, in developing social capital, facilitates personal development and empowerment and contributes to communal well-being and social cohesion;
- education, in all its phases and aspects, is central to the knowledge economy and economic prosperity;

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- education, in its fullest sense, embraces both the formal and informal and is the responsibility not just of professionals, but of students, parents and society as a whole;
- a commitment to, and appropriate investment in education, in all phases, is an essential investment in Northern Ireland as an economic entity and, as importantly, as a stable society respectful of diversity and individual needs; and
- teaching is the core profession for the knowledge economy in that it is the bedrock of knowledge development in all domains .  
(GTCNI, 2007:48-49).

There are clear resonances with the work of Dewey (1916) here where education and active citizenship are seen as central to the construction of democratic society. Olsen, Codd and O'Neill (2004:1-2) support this by stating that,

...a deep and robust democracy at a national level requires a strong civil society based on norms of trust and active responsible citizenship and [that] education is central to such a goal.

The GTCNI's view on the nature and purpose of education is clearly in line with this perspective both in terms of what is required for the future stability and development of NI as an individual state (OFMDFM, 2005), and as a participant in the broader context of global economic and knowledge-based communities. Central to the achievement of these aspirations of course is the work of the teaching professional.

*Teaching as a professional activity – The scope of the policy*

It is clear from the outset that this is a document primarily for teachers and is about teaching as a *professional* activity. The theme of 'professionalism' is highlighted in the title of the document: 'Teaching: the Reflective Profession' and immediately provides an indication of the stance being adopted by the GTCNI. This theme runs throughout the document with the term profession/professional/professionalism' being used on 132 occasions throughout the text. The position is clearly stated in the first sentence of the Forward which states,

It is with considerable pride that we welcome the publication of this celebration of teacher professionalism (GTCNI, 2007:4).

The Forward goes on to state that:

'The General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) has consistently rejected any attempt to adopt a reductionist approach to

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professional development and the adoption of a competence based analysis underpins the Council's belief that professional knowledge is by its very nature organic, and to an extent evolutionary, reflecting a synthesis of research, experiences gained and expertise shared in communities of practice.'

Automatically, the technical rational view of teaching is dismissed (Norris, 1991; Lester, 1995) and the position of the teacher as the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983; Pring, 1992; Carr, 1993; Hargreaves, 2003) is established. This viewpoint is consistently reinforced in the Introduction section which suggests that,

Teaching can never be reduced to a set of discrete skills to be mastered in some mechanical process of assimilation. To adopt such a reductionist approach would be to deny the intellectual basis of our work and the richness of the on-going dialogue and learning that enhances our professional practice.

...the teacher competences must be considered holistically and not treated as a series of discrete entities, divested of values or a sense of mission and professional identity (GTCNI, 2007:5).

The document also engages in a number of discourses pertinent to the nature of professionalism and professional activity. Section three is entitled 'Teaching in the Knowledge Society and Economy'. Here, the GTCNI address what have been described as the joint discourses of the 'learning society' and of 'flexibility' (Edwards, Nicholl and Tait, 1999; Edwards and Nicholl, 2001). The changing structure and needs of society in general is highlighted and the nature of teaching within this context is problematized. It states that,

Teachers work in an environment characterised by change and uncertainty, where it might be said that 'change' is, paradoxically, one of the few constants. The irony is that we in education are expected to develop in our young people the attributes, skills and capacities that will enable them to prosper and succeed in the knowledge society and, at the same time, we are expected to counteract and mitigate, to an extent, the problems emerging from an increasingly globalised economy (GTCNI, 2007:7).

A second, theme running through the document is the way in which it engages in a discourse of teaching as a value-laden activity and teachers as moral agents.

Teachers, in discharging their responsibilities, engage first and foremost as individuals with a sense of moral purpose and responsibility and it is in the

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interaction between mission, ethical understanding, and professional knowledge that the mystery that is never far from the heart of good teaching is to be found (GTCNI, 2007:5).

The fact that the GTCNI decided to include a 'Code of Values and Professional Practice' (GTCNI, 2005) as a specific part of the overall statement of competences is testament to the importance which is placed on this moral and ethical dimension of the work of teachers. The Code states that,

In keeping with the spirit of professional service and commitment, teachers will at all times be conscious of their responsibilities to others: learners, colleagues and indeed the profession itself (GTCNI, 2007:45).

This idea of the teacher working with and being responsible to others, is a hallmark of what Sachs (2001:153) refers to as 'democratic professionalism'. She states that,

The core of democratic professionalism is an emphasis on collaborative, cooperative action between teachers and other educational stakeholders.

The position outlined by the GTCNI would seem to rest comfortably within this discourse. They suggest that the work of teachers is concerned with service to individuals and society and as such is situated within an ethical framework and has a moral purpose. They cite the work of Day (2004) to propose that the role of teachers is central in the creation of democratically just societies and go on to say that 'in short, education must contribute not just to the individual's well-being but also to the common good. (GTCNI, 2007:7).

This theme of 'democratic professionalism' is continued with the adoption of the model of the teacher as the 'Reflective and Activist Practitioner'. The GTCNI draw on the work of Dalmau and Gudjonsdottir, (2002) and state that their interpretation of the,

...diverse roles that professional educators embrace...resonates with the Council's concept of the reflective and activist practitioner who, individually and collectively, will reflect on the nature and purposes of education, and will seek to act as both a shaper of policy and a well-informed critic of proposals and reforms (GTCNI, 2007:9).

This perspective relates very closely to Gidden's (1994: 16; 2000:7) notions of the social democratic project for the development of society. There is a clear rejection of mechanistic, approaches to teacher development or practice and of the idea of the teacher as apprentice, learning a craft 'on-site' (DfE, 2010). Rather, the GTCNI is stating that the 'activist' teacher is one who must shape

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their own destiny and that of the profession to which they belong. The idea of teacher autonomy is very strong here and poses distinct challenges to the 'common sense discourse' (Scott, 2000) perpetuated by government policy over the past forty years that teaching can be viewed as a technical rational activity and that teaching skills can be learned and applied in any context (Jessup, 1991). The GTCNI in articulating a clear model of teacher professionalism is problematizing this discourse, and is reflective of the position taken by Carr (1993:25) who states that '...the ideal of the reflective practitioner is also essentially that of the autonomous or extended professional who reserves a basic right to be critical of current political and social policies and initiatives'.

There is a definite challenge to existing power relationships presented here if the model of the activist teacher is to be actualised.

*Relationships and power – The pattern of the policy*

The GTCNI statement of competences provides a clearly articulated lifelong learning model of teacher education. By its own admission, this may be regarded as idealistic but this is rationalised in terms of being a necessary characteristic of the true professional.

Some might suggest that the Charter and Code reflect an idealism that sits ill at ease with the realities of school life. However, such a view fails to recognise that the profession, if it is to claim true professional status, must value idealism as an underpinning characteristic of the professional persona (GTCNI, 2007:8).

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the realisation of this idealism is the demands which, by its nature the competence framework places on existing relationships between the key educational stakeholders in NI. There are a number of occasions throughout the document where there is a direct challenge to the power of government over the issue of governance of the teaching profession. In the section on 'The Reflective and Activist Teacher' the GTCNI state that the teacher should be a 'shaper of policy and a well-informed critic of proposals and reforms' (Pg. 9). Similarly, the Council states that '*regardless* [author's emphasis] of changing conceptions of professional practice, an ethical and value-based approach to teacher professionalism and professional identity' (Pg. 5) is what they favour. This of course is a very different conception of the teacher from that advocated in current government policy in the rest of the UK (DfE, 2010) and there is a clear suggestion here that power and authority should emanate from the profession itself rather than being received from others. The issue of power being placed in the hands of the profession is not as straightforward as it may seem however.

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The GTCNI is the regulating body for the teaching profession in NI. Section two of the competence framework outlines how it might be used in practice and suggests that it should,

- assist with the process of personal reflection and the identification of professional development needs;
- provide a meaningful basis for professional dialogue in respect of professional development, including Performance Review and Staff Development (PRSD);
- facilitate the development and delivery of programmes – by those providing teacher education at initial and subsequent phases – appropriate to the needs of the profession;
- provide the basis for collaborative planning around identified needs at various levels: whole-school, key stage, department and interest group;
- offer a foundation for those working as mentors or as school-based professional learning and development coordinators to support beginning teachers and teachers undertaking Continuing Professional Development (CPD);
- inform important aspects of School Development and School Improvement Planning; and

help with the establishment of a whole-school Teaching and Learning Strategy

(GTCNI, 2007:6).

It is clear from this that the GTCNI is hoping that the framework will be used at all stages of teacher education from ITE through to CPD and should also have influence upon all aspects of teachers' practice both at personal, collaborative and whole-school development levels. Not only is this a challenge to governmental control and influence on the work of teachers but it also challenges the autonomy of the key providers at the various different stages of teacher education as well as individual teachers and schools in relation to their own developmental decision-making. There is the potential here for a complete shift of power and authority in teacher development and practice to move to the GTCNI. This position is somewhat tempered later however when the GTCNI state that,

It is also important that the exemplars are not viewed as a teacher education curriculum, or as prescriptive benchmarks to be applied

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irrespective of the specific context within which teachers work or the challenges and development opportunities afforded them; rather, they are the basis for reflection and dialogue, and a vehicle for needs analysis and forward planning (GTCNI, 2007:16).

The question of power remains important nonetheless and is further complicated by the existing structures and relationships in teacher education in NI. As previously mentioned, the use of a competence framework for teacher education is not new in NI but has been in existence since 1998 (NITEC and CEPD, 1998). Despite the innate appeal of the NITEC model, it experienced difficulties in implementation in that there was a 'disconnect' across the different phases of the profession. The Chief Inspector of Schools in NI, reflecting on the model suggested that,

The implications of truly effective partnerships, while espoused by all in theory, often falter in execution as one or other partner fails to honour its obligations, or more commonly looks to its own narrower interests (Matchett, 2003:14).

In many ways, the same could be said of the current GTCNI model. If a truly integrated model of teacher professionalism is to be realised, the GTCNI competence framework demands a major rethink of existing relationships in relation to teacher education across the different phases. In 2003, DENI and the Department for Employment and Learning [DEL] initiated a review of teacher education. The recommendations of this review were not circulated for consultation until 2010 (DEL and DENI, 2010) and to this point, no outcome from the review has emerged. This level of inertia does not bode well for the future development of a coherent model of teacher education and professionalism in NI. One of the recommendations of the report was that a Teacher Education Committee would be established which 'will enable all teacher education partners to work together and to make recommendations on the direction of teacher education at all stages' (Part 4 para. 9). If such a body is ever to be established, then it may be here that the real potential for greater connectivity between the different phases of teacher education and the realisation of the aspirations implicit within the GTCNI competence framework may occur.

### **Conclusion**

The GTCNI approach to competences has built on and developed the previous competence framework for NI which was characterized by its individuality and difference in approach from the other jurisdictions of the UK. As such, since 1998, NI has had a clearly articulated policy strategy towards the use of competence frameworks for teacher education which rejects the technical-rational model of competence development. The model adopted is well placed

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within what might be described as the 'academic' discourse, as opposed to the 'operational' discourse on the use of competence approaches to teacher education (Barnett, 1994). In response to the question posed at the outset of this paper, it would seem that the GTCNI is clearly engaging in the 'struggle for teacher autonomy and responsibility in a 'social justice' project (Ozga, 2000:44). The competence framework is also centred on a concept of partnership and collaboration and explicitly sets out to promote critically reflective and activist teachers. In this sense, it could be argued that the GTCNI competence framework actually moves beyond either the academic or operational discourses and moves towards what Barnett (1994:178) calls a 'life-world becoming' paradigm i.e. one which enables better practical understanding based on critical reflection through dialogue and metalearning. There are numerous factors which have the potential to mitigate the achievement of this aim however and there is still much to be done to ensure that the foundation which the competences provide lead to a more joined-up active professionalism in the future.

The promotion of reflective practice for example, is difficult in a policy culture underpinned by accountability, school improvement and raising standards (DENI, 2009). This is perhaps accentuated in the NI context given the continued existence of the grammar school system and the process of transfer at the end of the primary school phase which places considerable pressure on teachers and schools alike (DENI, 2001). In addition to this, there are difficulties in relation to the recording, transference and development of reflective practice between the phases, with allied issues of ownership, monitoring and purpose. The GTCNI (2005) has recommended that this issue be addressed via the introduction of an electronic portfolio and steps have been taken to proceed with this (McNair and Marshall, 2006; McNair and Stewart, 2008). Further evaluation needs to be conducted however to assess the potential for the use of the e-portfolio to become fully embedded within the professional culture of teachers at different stages of their careers.

The GTCNI call for 'appropriate investment in education, in all phases' (Pg. 48) and suggest that it is the 'right of all engaged in the processes of education to on-going professional development appropriate to their needs' (Pg. 49). They regard this investment as necessary for the development of the profession as well as for the development of society in NI. The difficulty of course, is that in the current economic climate, investment in all public services is under threat. If more effective partnership relationships are to develop, this may require a complete restructuring of the current education system, which would seem at best, aspirational.

Although the GTCNI provide a clear rationale for their model of teacher, the key issues of implementation demand further consideration. The issue of teacher assessment within the competence framework is central here. Currently, there

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are different bodies and modes of assessment of teacher development and practice at each phase of teacher education, but each operate independently of the other. If the issues of partnership and the development of connectivity are to be addressed effectively, then consideration must be given to where the overall responsibility for teacher development lies. If it is to be with the GTCNI as the regulatory body, then issues surrounding the autonomy of each member of the partnership cannot be ignored.

Each of the key stakeholder groups involved in teacher education in NI have a distinctive contribution to make to the development of a more connected and better defined teacher professionalism. The GTCNI competence framework provides a solid platform and foundation for this to develop but this will not happen if the stagnation of the past nine years of the teacher education review (DEL and DENI, 2003) continues. The education system in general and the structures within it in NI present many challenges. If the issues which they give rise to are to be resolved, it will demand great clarity of thought and purpose and high levels of creativity. Furlong, Barton, Miles and Whitty, (2000:175) suggest that new forms of teacher professionalism and teacher identities are required which can be 'based upon more participatory relationships with diverse communities'. It would seem that this is exactly what is required in the NI context.

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