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Playing it real in a virtual context: Developing sustainable connections to university

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Abstract

For teachers from within the early childhood education and care sector, working with children and families in the current societal context has become increasingly problematic (Gardner, 1999, 2003). From one standpoint, research has indicated that much of the difficulty associated with working in this field is symptomatic of the uncertainty, discontinuity and insecurity characteristic of the post-modern condition (Dahlgren & Chiriac, 2009; Hulqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Jenks, 1996a, 1996b; Lyotard, 1984; Prout, 2003). As authors of this paper, whilst we agree with this particular standpoint, it can be argued that the aforementioned perspective can be seen as an over-simplification of the problems in the ECEC field. While the characteristics of the post-modern condition may be considered to be at the heart of some of these problems, the complexities of current policy reform, the demands of neo-liberal approaches to the provision of care and education (Ball, 2003; Popkewitz, 2000; Rose, 1999, 2000), as well as a lack of understanding of current contexts for children and their families compound the present state of play across the sector (Moss, 2003; Prout, 2003). Thus, new demands are evident for teachers in the ECEC field in relation to both personal and professional skill development. Therefore preparation for understanding the impact these contexts have on their identity development is critical to evaluating pre-service educator's university experiences in contrast with the reality of the rural practice context.

On the grounds that learners view and interpret new information and experiences through their existing network of knowledge, experience and beliefs (Dahlgren & Chiriac, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Helm, 2006), the project's design acknowledges and anticipates that the beginner teachers' experiences will be shaped, in part, by what they

'bring' to those experiences, including their initial choices to enter the profession, and their prior conceptions and expectations about teaching and initial teacher preparation (Helm, 2006). In this case study, juxtaposition between preconceptions and expectations of pre-service teacher education and early experiences as beginning teacher in a rural Australian context are explored and the key research questions guiding data interrogation include:

- What are the connections between your initial expectations about becoming a teacher and commencing your university studies and the reality of teaching in a rural context?
- How has this influenced or shaped your professional identity and learning?
- How has the rural context impacted upon the manifestation of the curriculum, impacting your professional decisions and development?
- How do you use the knowledge, skills and abilities developed at University in your professional context?
- What have you learned about yourself as an individual as well as you as a professional? What will you do differently now as an outcome of your professional learning thus far?

A model of critical reflection is used to interrogate the data from interviews and facebook postings over a 2 year period. Key themes emerged and these relate to the concept of teacher identity, the role of relationships, a sense of agency, the notion of relevance, and the central presence of emotion. In this paper these themes are presented as core features of the experience of 'becoming a teacher'.

Introduction

In the Australian education context, the rate of change within the workplace can be best described as reaching fever pitch and there are enormous implications for the construction of learning environments as well as for the educators working across this broad sector. Such reform directly impacts the professionals working within these.

For teachers from within the early childhood education and care sector, working with children and families in the current societal context has become increasingly problematic (Gardner, 1999, 2003; Prout, 2003). From one standpoint, research has indicated that much of the difficulty associated with working in this field is symptomatic of the uncertainty, discontinuity and insecurity characteristic of the post-modern condition (Dahlgren & Chiriac, 2009; Hulqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Jenks, 1996a, 1996b; Lyotard, 1984; Prout, 2003). As authors of this paper, whilst we agree with this particular standpoint, it can be argued that the aforementioned perspective can be seen as an oversimplification of the problems in the ECEC field. While the characteristics of the post-modern condition may be considered to be at the heart of some of these problems, the complexities of current policy reform, the demands of neo-liberal approaches to the provision of care and education (Ball, 2003; Hulqvist, 1998; Popkewitz, 2000; Rose, 1999, 2000), as well as a lack of understanding of current contexts for children and their families compound the present state of play across the sector (Moss, 2003; Prout, 2003). Thus, new demands are evident for teachers in the ECEC field in relation to both personal and professional skill development. Therefore preparation for understanding the impact these often unfamiliar contextual factors have on identity development (personal and professional) is critical to evaluating pre-service educator's preparedness for the realities of practice contexts.

Graduates entering the workforce can find themselves working in contexts of which they have limited experience. As such, preparatory university programs of study need to reflect these changes and ensure that degree programs that are offered do indeed meet the ever-changing needs of the students that enroll, providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills that are transferable across this broad sector.

The paper provides an overview of an in-progress study, aimed at identifying the conceptions of graduate students' preparedness as reflective practitioners for their work with young children and their families across the ECEC sector, particularly in relation to unfamiliar contexts. This is legitimated by the present climate of reform within the ECEC sector, and, as such is a timely investigation. Coupled with this, is the need to

constantly evaluate university ECEC practitioner preparation programs, in order that they continue to provide students with the necessary skills, knowledge and abilities vital for their effective transition to their chosen areas of professional practice. The data presented here relates to one of the case studies being undertaken with graduates of a four year pre-service early childhood degree program.

Meeting pre-service teachers where they are: ‘Bringing in the real’ and forming connections between personal and professional identity

On the grounds that learners view and interpret new information and experiences through their existing network of knowledge, experience and beliefs (Dahlgren & Chiriac, 2009), the project’s design acknowledges and anticipates that the beginner teachers’ experiences will be shaped, in part, by what they ‘bring’ to those experiences, including their initial choices to enter the profession, and their prior conceptions and expectations about teaching and initial teacher preparation. In this case study, juxtaposition between preconceptions and expectations of pre-service teacher education and early experiences as beginning teacher in a rural Australian context are explored and the key research questions guiding data interrogation include:

- What are the connections between your initial expectations about becoming a teacher and commencing your university studies and the reality of teaching in a rural context?
- How has this influenced or shaped your professional identity and learning?
- How has the rural context impacted upon the manifestation of the curriculum, impacting your professional decisions and development?
- How do you use the knowledge, skills and abilities developed at University in your professional context?
- What have you learned about yourself as an individual as well as you as a professional? What will you do differently now as an outcome of your professional learning thus far?

A model of critical reflection is used to interrogate the data from video-recorded interviews and facebook postings over a 2 year period. Within each case study the

researchers and participants work together to confront and deconstruct the transition to employment context following graduation from their degree program. Following from this, and again working collaboratively, the interview context provides opportunities to develop an awareness of existing capabilities of the current pre-service education program and new directions required in order to maximize graduates own learning futures and those of their students. This final step sees application of theoretical understandings of learners and learning, teachers and teaching and the identification of alternative approaches that may be adopted (see Noble, Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2006; Noble & Henderson, 2008).

A key objective of this method is to explicate the assumptions and value positions that develop as result of engagement in a pre-service education program, while at the same time developing a greater understanding of the potential constraints on that process. This elaboration includes identifying both the convergences and the potential divergences among pedagogy and practice, and how future program developments can be brought into greater alignment to mutual benefit in the context of an evidence-based and forward-thinking approach to unpacking preparation of early childhood educators for contemporary learning contexts.

Key themes emerged and these relate to the concept of teacher identity, the role of relationships, a sense of agency, the notion of relevance, and the central presence of emotion. In this paper these initial themes are presented and illustrative excerpts of interview transcripts used to explore the experience of 'becoming a teacher'. Initial challenges for pre-service teacher education programs are emerging from the outset and these will also be discussed as a means of stimulating and encouraging professional learning and dialogue.

Developing agency and the exploration of the emergence of 'teacher identity'

This section of the paper is focused on providing an overview of each of the themes that emerged from the case of a beginning teacher over the first two years after entry to the workforce. Personal identity and professional identity development are inextricably

linked and that over time a growing sense of acceptance and confidence ensues to better position oneself as ‘teacher’. The development of professional identity is related to adjustment and the notion of ‘taking time’.

It was all very daunting to begin with. A lot of extra time needs to be put into getting up to speed and to keep up with expectations. Getting to know the children and adjusting to a new context is really difficult. Moving out of home and so far away was another hurdle that I had to deal with at the same time. But, once I accepted that things had to be different, it was okay, I was fine after that. Once you get to know the community and get to know the kids it gets a whole lot easier. You just can't imagine how hard the mix of the personal and professional hurdles will be before you are there living it! Being away from your support networks is really hard – even now as I am in my second year there. Going to a remote, rural community – there were all kinds of things to consider that you would just not think of – things like internet reception and stuff like that – you just took it all for granted before that I guess.

One's practice always exists within a context and is underpinned by prior experience. High quality practice is associated with measures of positive teacher self efficacy (Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Justice, Mashburn, Hamre & Pianta, 2008; Miller Marsh, 2002) and thus the importance of privileging social as well as academic and professional literacy in pre-service education is able to be established. The development of greater connections between university and the broader education community results in higher levels of awareness of quality practice and critical reflection.

Preparing for the classroom was hard. Lots of time spent in the beginning on setting up the physical learning space and making the environment aesthetically pleasing and functional. There is a lot of thinking and rethinking at first – it seems simple really but you haven't had to do a lot of that at Uni – even though you talk about it and explore various theoretical perspectives, it's different when it is real and you don't have your mentor teacher there to talk it through – you don't have a back-up and you have to learn to trust your own judgments. At Uni you are more likely to walk into the classroom that

is already established and sure, you might change things, but it's different when there is absolutely nothing and you are starting with a completely blank canvas. You have to think about how the space will help you create the type of classroom context that you think is important for learning. You put a lot of pressure on yourself to begin with really over what now seem like simple things.

The challenge of developing strong university/community partnerships and connections to the profession are critical to the provision of opportunities for pre-service teachers to connect theory and practice. The plethora of previous experiences provides a strong foundation on which to continue to build one's teacher identity.

It was helpful to have done a prac in a multiage classroom while at Uni, it really gave me somewhere to start – some basic level of understanding and experience of how I might go about things. You really need to be on top of things from the very beginning, there just isn't time to go about re-doing everything when you get it completely wrong. I spend lots of time going over lots of the things I did at Uni – things that perhaps I didn't think were so important at the time. It all seems so much more important now!

In scoping and sequencing professional experience opportunities for pre-service education students, time spent in schools is seen as much more than a training process. Rather the embedded professional experiences across the program of study can be conceptualized as the beginning of a socio-cultural learning process.

Concept of 'teacher' and teaching as related to learner and learning

Pre-service teacher education programs, when seen as the beginning of a professional learning journey, work to situate the undergraduate student as a lifelong learner. Through ongoing engagement in learning, the novice teacher is better positioned to serve and teach children in contemporary and future-focused learning contexts

Looking back, besides giving me knowledge of theory as well as what happens in current practice, my degree has taught me that I will always be a learner. It wasn't just about

preparing me for teaching, for the now, but it was as much about what to do when you don't know what to do. You don't really get that until you are out there. I think that I have become self sufficient in so many ways – you have to rely on yourself and to work out how to find out what you don't know in a hurry. The theory and pedagogy courses that I did really give me useful insights into how to better support the decisions that I am making and helps me to understand why things happen and how I can create positive change in my future practice.

Responding to the ebb and flow of crisis or opportunity creates a context for the possibility of transformative education (Belcher & Schwartz, 2007), rather than mere translation or transfer of knowledge. Accordingly, Brown (2007) posits that “the learning environment is not just a physical space or a location of learning but the total conditions that enable and constrain learning” (p. 62). Therefore one can see that the adoption of such a disposition to learning creates the possibility to make an active choice about a conception of learning that is futures-focused rather than retrospective and that enables rather than constrains professional identity development and continuous learning.

Professional literacy is identified as another key element of teacher identity and the teacher has long been identified as being central to the quality of children's learning (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Helm, 2006). It is recognized that from the outset, the novice teacher is expected to be able to adopt a position of mastery in terms of accountability for learning and this includes an awareness of how classroom cultures operates to produce optimum learning outcomes.

I felt a lot of pressure in terms of contextualizing learning, especially because I have a couple of children in each grade from prep to year 3. At the same time you are constantly struggling to be aware of where they are supposed to be. It's hard to know how they will compare to other kids across the state. The testing and all that adds lots of pressure – it's really challenging especially because you are so isolated I guess.

The development of a balance between explicit teaching and independent practice is seen as integral to creating optimum learning conditions.

Over time I have learned to be a bit more relaxed, it's really important to be able to do that so that you can make the most of the 'teachable moments' and not be so rigid with your plans. It is not so crucial to always be so in control now I have come to realize that nothing bad will happen and that control and management are very different. I think though looking back it is more about a lack of confidence and over time this does pass. I am not so worried about controlling everything these days! ...It's just about surviving and balancing everything at the start, it's about discussing with the children rather than directing; seeing that everyone can learn from one another and not only from me.

Through engagement in the early childhood specialisation within the pre-service teacher education program, it is clear that this novice teacher has developed a strong philosophical standpoint that impacts on her practice. However there is also a tension between such beliefs and the reality of the actual curriculum that must be adhered to.

Understanding and using the different curriculums and knowing how things all fit together is not easy. It was harder for me than some of my friends who only have one grade level to worry about that is for sure. Being early childhood I so wanted to have a play-based curriculum approach but it is difficult when there are competing agendas and so much pressure on assessing and accountability. Sometimes I still feel like I am being pulled by competing demands and that I don't always get to do what I think is best for the children.

...Sometimes it feels as though the explicit teaching is more important. In that way I have to comply with government agendas I guess and like many others say, this is the most efficient way to cover everything. I am not convinced though that the focus is on learning. I can know that I have taught something but it is not a guarantee that the children have learned it. This is usually best evidenced through independent and child-initiated learning experiences but this is not what is assessed and how it is to be assessed and it certainly does not stand them up well in national benchmarking.

While it is crucial that pre-service education programs expose these novice educators to the realities of current education contexts, it is also essential that they are able to contextualize theory and practice. Awareness of current lived experience is not enough though. For transformative education to occur, pre-service educators need to be well prepared for future learning contexts that may not even exist as yet. Therefore their skills, abilities and knowledge need to be much broader in focus so that they are well able to develop as confident, flexible, contemporary and progressive educators for new times.

Understanding the importance of critical reflection and the role of relationships

The importance of interactions and relationships clearly impacts the development of identity and self efficacy. The early establishment and maintenance of personal and professional networks in context are therefore important. While connections with past experience are maintained, over time it is clear that contextually situated interactions and relationships become highly valued and assist the novice teacher to support herself within this professional space.

In the beginning I relied a lot on my Uni friends, but over time, I really got to know others in my clusters and that was really good because their context was more similar to mine and it is a different level of understanding when you are living in the same 'space'. It's hard to imagine if you aren't living it.

Collaboration is a feature of professional standards and can be defined as a personal professional maturity (Dahlgren & Chiriac, 2009). Therefore the space for contextualized critical reflection with colleagues and other key stakeholders in the socio-cultural context enhances learning (Walkington, 2005).

I know at Uni we talked a lot about critical reflection and I know that we are hated it and thought it was very time consuming and not really relevant, but how wrong were we! Of everything, I think that the model of critical reflection is something that gets me through each and every day and helps me to depersonalize things, to take a step back and look at

things as they really are, to understand why they are that way and to look for ways to do it differently for greater effect next time. You need to do this formally at first, but over time, I find that I do it more often as I am living the classroom experience and even my teacher aide knows about the steps and works through them with me when we are talking about the day and the children. It can be chaos at times, but I find that having a step by step framework to use really helps to calm things down and see things as they really are and to solve your own problems really.

The establishment of both formal and informal networks is seen to be important to the ongoing development of the novice teacher.

Bringing in other adults and members of the community is hard and even though again, we learned about developing partnerships at Uni, the best advice I got from my cluster was just that. I realized that I couldn't do everything on my own and that if I involved others and won them over, I could achieve so much more with their support. You realize too that they need encouragement too to feel confident in what they are doing and by engaging with them in that way, they really get to know you and you begin to belong more quickly. It helps you to feel confident too.

Within this new context, a growing sense of independence is evident. What is clear is that skills of critical reflection, that is reflecting in-action and on-action provides emotional support as well as enabling her to view her practice in terms of constantly traversing the theory/practice nexus. In her words, such a framework helps her to know what to do when she doesn't know what to do!

Professional dialogue with others in the same, or even very different situations, was really very helpful. It is important professionally, but it is also important for personal survival too. You get to share ideas and learn from one another but importantly, it gave me confidence to see myself as a real teacher doing real work. Some of the really important things I learned were that talking things through honestly and asking lots of

questions of one another helped to solve many of our problems, even if it was on the phone because we were so far away.

From an emotional perspective, becoming a teacher is not a linear journey, but rather can be seen as cyclical in many ways. There is a continuous juxtaposition between vulnerability and growing confidence in terms of self-belief and confidence in one's professional persona.

Discussion

It is important to read the excerpts in terms of what is made visible as well as what remains silent. Clearly there are times when one's emotional response within context is overwhelmingly positive but likewise there are other times where it is evident that the commencement of this professional learning journey in context is fraught with tensions that are both personal and professional in nature. Over time, there is a certain acceptance of both 'place' and 'space'. That is, over time this teacher identifies a developing sense of connection or 'belonging' to the community in which her practice is situated. It is also clear that the teacher plays a part in her own emotional control and that her identity is constituted in relation to the emotional response to the context in which her practice is situated (Zemblyas, 2005). Therefore the socio-cultural contexts of teaching impact significantly on the quality of the professional learning journey.

The initial analysis of this case has in many ways confirmed what is already evidenced in the transition to teaching literature around the development of personal and professional agency over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Miller & Marsh, 2002; Moore, Edwards, Halpin & George, 2002). As one becomes more familiar with the context in which one is situated, their identity is positively impacted (Sharp & Turner, 2007; Guo, Piasta, Justice & Kaderavek, 2010). While observation from this case leads to understanding that each individual reacts in different ways to particular situations, especially when outside of one's comfort zone, there are broad implications for pre-service educators to consider in the ways in which academic, information and professional literacies are woven together from the outset of the journey to 'become teacher'. Specifically, being able to establish

and maintain professional networks that are mobile as well as contextual are skills to be fostered from the outset.

The authors posit that within the pre-service education learning journey the social and the academic aspects of ‘becoming teacher’ need to be constantly traversed. It is through the establishment of facilitative, collegial and critically reflective practices that one is empowered in terms of identity as teacher and confidence in the practice of developing a contextually-relevant learning environment.

The positioning of self as both teacher and learner are important to ongoing professional identity development. Bringing the ‘lived experience’ to life within the undergraduate program remains a challenge for all. By integrating learning and developing connections across courses to the lived experiences of those already practicing in the broader education community, pre-service educators may be better equipped to challenge established grand narratives or taken-for granted ‘truths’ about teachers and teaching, learners and learning. Through such interactions, they may more easily interrogate their own practice and the practice of others in critically constructive ways.

It is expected that when one sees commencement of university studies as the first stage of professional induction, rather than upon entry to the workforce, many of the current ‘silences’ that exist as one begins their career as a teacher may be overcome. Through ongoing membership of such networks, or communities of practice, one is exposed more consistently over time to implications associated with traversing the theory/practice nexus (Noble, Macfarlane & Cartmel, 2006; Noble & Henderson, 2008; Sharp & Turner, 2007). It is envisaged that, over time, a stronger sense of alumni may be fostered with these beginning teachers then acting as mentors to other pre-service educators, thereby building capacity within the education workforce.

Further cases will be developed to add greater dimension and rigor to this initial analysis and the authors will continue to explore ways in which greater professional connectedness may be integrated across tertiary studies as a result. At the same time

continuation of the development of this community of practice will be privileged, providing further opportunities to explore the scholarship of tertiary pre-service teacher education and to create a more authentic learning space from the outset.

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