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Teacher education students and their understanding of rural context

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Abstract

'Going for gold' for future rural students requires that initial teacher education includes effective preparation for teaching in rural contexts. This necessity is alluded to in several key documents. Professional standards for teacher registration in South Australia include the core principle that graduate teachers will understand learners' social and cultural contexts and how these may influence learning (Teachers Registration Board of South Australia, 2011). The HREOC *Recommendations* (2000) called for education in rural communities that is both 'Acceptable' and 'Adaptable'. These expectations, along with calls by key educators (e.g. Luke, 2010) for an intellectually demanding curriculum, require graduate teachers to deliver teaching that pays close attention to the socio-cultural background of students attending rural schools. Literacy education that is appropriate to context is one of the themes in a literacy topic for middle and secondary years of schooling pre-service teacher education students. Socio-cultural theories underpin the topic and are returned to in the exploration of place and place-based education for literacy education in content area teaching in local contexts, including rural contexts. The question is how well prepared are these pre-service teacher education students for teaching in rural and other disadvantaged communities?

This paper draws on literature about literacy education, place, and place-based education as a basis for data analysis using critical discourse analysis (Luke, 2010). Data from past students' submissions to the online learning environment that is part of the topic, is analysed for evidence of students having at least a 'dawning realisation' (Freedman & Carver, 2007) of linking content learning and literacy development, and the importance of students' contexts, and rural contexts in particular. Results suggest these students are developing ideas about literacy education that will be appropriate to rural contexts, however further research will be required to explore whether they are able to implement context relevant teaching early in their careers.

Keywords: Teacher education, rural education, place, place based education

Introduction

Successful literacy education and high levels of successful engagement in education is vital for students attending rural schools in Australia, particularly those who will remain in rural communities for all or much of their lives. One could say our nation's future sustainability depends on it! It is important that new teachers graduate equipped to work in rural schools, as a significant proportion commence their teaching careers in rural and remote locations. This research draws on socio-cultural theories of literacy education. Learning outcomes for the cohort of pre-service teacher education students being studied are based on the graduate entry requirements of the Teachers Registration Board of South Australia (2011), *Recommendations* from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2000) and a framework from Freedman and Carver (2007).

A cohort of approximately 230 teacher education students were enrolled in the topic EDUC2320 Literacy and Numeracy in the Middle Years at Flinders University in 2010. For undergraduate students this was a second year topic in a four year double degree program, with students having already studied education topics of sociology and philosophy in their first year program. Master of Teaching students were enrolled in the topic in the first semester of their two year pre-service degree, concurrently studying a topic with a sociology focus, a psychology topic and a curriculum topic as they prepared for a four week placement in the

first four weeks of the second semester. Undergraduate students were concurrently completing a school placement of 10 days across the semester. The question for this research is 'How well were pre-service teacher education students from a topic which prepares students to teach literacy in the middle and secondary years equipped and prepared for literacy teaching that is relevant and appropriate to rural students?'

Almost all students begin the topic puzzled that they are required to study the teaching of literacy (Freedman & Carver, 2007; Morse, 2008/2009). They see their future roles as teachers of the content in a particular learning area (Moje, 2008; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Carrillo, & Collazo, 2004; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Many pre-service teacher education students in South Australia are unfamiliar with rural places and rurality. Attention to preparation for teaching in a rural location is important for these students as more than 70 percent of the state's population is concentrated in Adelaide.

From the literature

Many classrooms have a diverse range of students. Students bring different experiences with oral language and written texts into the classroom, mainly shaped by the sociocultural practices of their home (Heath, 1983; Williams, 2005/6) and community (Donehower, 2007). Some useful ways of thinking about this have been suggested. Thomson (2002) introduced us to the 'virtual school bag', while Moje et. al. (2004) have written of students' 'funds of knowledge'. Active use of either of these metaphors allows teachers to value and understand students' cultural capital, and then assist students to begin to access mainstream literacy practices. It is important teachers respond to the socio cultural background and context of students if students are to be engaged and motivated (Corbett, 2010).

Sociocultural diversity amongst students is often a distinguishing feature of rural communities that include businesses and services from the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy, and possibly the quaternary sector as well. Lo Bianco and Freebody's (1997) outline of literacy practices important to each sector of the economy highlights the range that may be familiar to students, but with few of those valued in the classroom. The complexity of rural education is highlighted by Sher and Sher's (1994) point that students from rural communities need to be educated to remain in a rural community, to build a future in urban locations, or for movement between rural and urban locations. This complexity does not need to be considered by schools in metropolitan locations. Schools in rural Australia have higher proportions of newly trained teachers (Green & Reid, 2010). These new teachers need to avoid reverting to the pedagogies they experienced as students, and to have moved beyond the understandings or assumptions they gained from an 'apprenticeship of observation' (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

It is important that the literacy education available to rural students does not suggest low expectations or pedagogies that correspond to those low expectations (Anyon, 2003) but instead is challenging (Luke, 2010). Gee's (1996) position that a person is literate when they are able to communicate fluently with another discourse community, signals the importance of students being inducted or guided by their teachers into other literacy practices that will empower them to succeed at school and be equipped for productive futures in employment and participation in community life. The concept of enabling students to learn in a third space, of the intersection between the literacy practices known to them and literacy practices that are to be learned provides good opportunities for productive learning (Lo Bianco, Liddicoat, & Crozet, 1999; Moje, et al., 2004). Place-based education provides opportunities for encouraging students to engage with local issues and become familiar with local resources

including knowledgeable community members (Brooke, 2003; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Smith & Sobel, 2010).

Two other sources have been drawn on for thinking about rural education. The National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education (2000) suggested five criteria be used to evaluate rural education. Two are particularly relevant to question about preparation for teaching in rural and remote schools. 'Acceptability' seeks curriculum and teaching methods that are relevant, culturally appropriate and of good quality. The second, 'Adaptability' calls for flexible education that is adapted to the needs of changing communities, and responsive to students' needs, where each student can develop to their fullest potential. That is, if there is a commitment to appropriately educate every child in Australia, then teachers must be able to respond appropriately to the context and sociocultural characteristics of the students in their classes. The Teacher Registration Board of South Australia's professional standards for graduates applying for teacher registration in South Australia include Learner Respect (teachers fostering trusting and respectful relationships with learners) and Learner Context (teachers knowing about learner contexts and diversity). Indicators for each of these standards include links between students' contexts, influences on their learning, and engagement with learning, that beginning teachers need to understand and draw on in their teaching (Teachers Registration Board of South Australia, 2011).

Methodology and Method

Freedman and Carver (2007) looked at the transformation of teacher education students from a simplistic viewpoint in relation to the teaching of literacy, as they participated in two simultaneous courses of a teacher education program. One was a general methods (instructional planning, teaching and assessment) course, and the other a secondary content literacy course (understandings of the integrated nature of literacy and learning). For this paper Freedman and Carver's developmental framework has been adopted. The developmental stages are: naïve wonder, dawning realisation, and intellectual rigor. They described their students at the mid-semester point as: having a dawning realisation of the reality of the classroom and what it means to teach; presenting concrete and grounded reflections, with a change of focus from themselves to their students; and an awareness of the range of teaching strategies available. By the end of the semester, where students exhibiting 'intellectual rigour' revealed: an orientation to their futures as teachers; recognition of the complex and intellectually changing role of the teacher; the need to pay attention to student diversity; awareness of the importance of engaging students with relevant material that promotes understanding; and that all teachers need to embed literacy strategies within content teaching. In this study texts have also been analysed for: content that shows recognition of the importance of context; the need to adapt teaching strategies to students' contexts; and evidence these pre-service teachers can draw on local resources for planning learning activities.

Data for this study is 2-300 word texts students were to post in the online space provided for the topic. Each student was required to make four posts across the semester, including a post for weeks 8-10 and another for weeks 11-12. The posts were an opportunity for students to respond to one of the set readings for those weeks, with fellow students able to read all other posts and either respond to an existing post or start a new discussion thread. The posts in Week 9 were in response to readings with a focus on place-based education and links between students' home community and learning in school. The final post, for either Week 11 or 12, was an opportunity for students to write about the literacy educator they hoped to become. Here I use analysis from posts for weeks 9, and 11-12. These weeks have been chosen as the ones that provide an opportunity to locate evidence students were thinking about curriculum

and relevance of curriculum and pedagogy to place in particular, and their understanding about literacy education in the last teaching weeks of the topic. Thirty eight students gave consent for their posts to be included in this project.

Analysis

A few students included in their texts discussions about diversity. The most frequent discussion about diversity was related to the necessity to recognise students as individuals, and using that understanding to develop appropriate learning opportunities, ensuring engaging and motivating learning, and providing explicit teaching as needed. One student included the term 'habitus' (from Bourdieu) in her discussion on student diversity. Overall there was more recognition of individuality on the part of students, and less recognition of context as a contributor to diversity across a state education system or at a national level.

In relation to embedding literacy in the curriculum one student wrote of designing curriculum 'to put the students' interest and expertise at the centre of classroom learning' and in a 'purposeful context'. He saw this as a means of drawing on students' 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) in a productive way, indicating knowledge of the importance of place and community in students' lives. Other students who referred to embedding literacy instruction in the classroom did not link this with the context of students. Rather, they saw content area teaching as central to their teaching.

Context was an important concept for many students. Some students referred to the importance of the context of their future students' successful learning at school, and successful engagement in literacy learning in particular. They mentioned students' individual knowledge, students' culture and home background, the importance of utilizing students' 'funds of knowledge', and having knowledge of student and school contexts as a basis for developing classroom instruction (after reading Fuller and Hood (2005)). Others discussed the benefits for students of experiencing learning activities based on the local community (after reading Comber, Thomson and Wells (2001) and suggested incorporating 'each school's distinctive community into their classrooms'. Several texts included mention of the importance of connections between students' communities and personal lives and learning in their classrooms. Several final posts included discussion about Connor's (2002) work on developing units of work and made a link with the importance of curriculum connecting with students' everyday lives.

Other texts included discussion about the importance of student motivation and engagement for effective learning, and the value of using local resources or links with students' activities out of school to maintain motivation. One student wrote in her Week 9 post in response to reading a newspaper article by Gay (2004) about schooling in a remote community in Alaska:

Having not grown up in a rural community myself I was intrigued by their easily adaptable curriculum and method of reaching the students. The students in that Alaskan school were engaged in learning that included in the curriculum of indigenous knowledge that drew on the expertise of community members.

This text also indicates acknowledgment of complexity of teaching, particularly for remote indigenous students living in their communities, with the recognition of the value of resources outside the classroom particularly for these students. Interest in this example of place-based education also suggests openness to working to adapt the learning activities offered and the importance that learning be acceptable to the students and their community.

There was also discussion by one student of the value of embedding literacy in content area teaching, and of using the Four Resources Model (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke, 1999) as a

model planning literacy learning, and paying attention to students and to their lives outside school. Some discussions also included mention of the socio-cultural background of students, and their differing cultural contexts. Where students take the importance of these understandings and are willing to apply them to teaching in both disadvantaged schools in metropolitan areas and in rural locations, their students will benefit.

Some conclusions

The students' posts in the on-line learning space for the topic indicate they are partially equipped for supporting literacy learning in rural and other disadvantaged communities. The socio-cultural understanding of literacy is evident in students' posts. The topic learning outcome that students understand the importance of embedding literacy teaching in content area teaching is demonstrated. This approach to teaching in the middle and secondary years means that fewer students will be left without the means to develop literacy practices that are unfamiliar to them, to their families, and rarely observed in their rural community, yet expected in the content area classroom. Students also demonstrated they understand about adapting teaching (National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education (Australia), 2000), in particular through the selection of resources and learning activities, relevant to the context of their students. Their understanding of the need to ensure their teaching is acceptable (National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education (Australia), 2000) to students is less clear.

Given the complexity of rural schools including as a result of student diversity, and given that often rural students differ from their metropolitan peers in a number of ways, the focus on diversity (Teachers Registration Board of South Australia, 2011) in the texts analysed is an important outcome. However, many comments appear to be based on reflection of personal experience and therefore suggest a dawning realization of the full extent of student diversity and nature of its presence in the classroom rather than an intellectually rigorous understanding of student diversity (Freedman & Carver, 2007). Where discussion of diversity included links to other literature, it is likely these students will continue development of understanding about student diversity throughout their studies and preparation for their teaching careers. These students were also indicating they will meet the standards of the Teachers Registration Board of South Australia.

There was recognition of the complexity of teaching in students' texts. However, while the topic included recognition of changes in literacy practices (e.g. due to changes in technology) students did not demonstrate a deeper recognition of the complex and changing role of the teacher (Freedman & Carver, 2007). Many of the students' texts also appeared to be based on concrete grounded reflections rather than revealing an orientation to their futures as teachers (Freedman & Carver, 2007) which is concerning. However, it needs to be remembered that these students were either nearing the end of their third semester of studies in a four year program, or were in their first semester as a graduate student studying education.

It is not possible to judge how influential the understandings about diversity, the importance of context, or about acceptability and adaptability, will be remembered and drawn on when these students are working as teachers. To help with the retention of these concepts and their continued development it is important these students encounter in other topics they study the context and understandings of rural students and rural education. This is particularly necessary given that the majority of these students do not have a rural background. The moving of the topic to the third year of a new undergraduate program is likely to strengthen preparation of our pre-service teacher education students for teaching in rural contexts and other disadvantaged educational settings. From now on students will bring a stronger background from their first and second year studies in education to this topic focused on

literacy education. They will also have the opportunity to test their understandings about literacy education at the beginning of the following semester when they have a four week practicum placement, with some placements in rural schools.

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