Developing an Early Childhood Teacher Workforce Development Strategy for Rural and Remote Communities

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Abstract: The North West Early Childhood and Primary Teacher Workforce Development Strategy offers students in the Pilbara and Kimberley the opportunity to enrol in a Western Australian University's fully accredited Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary) part time and externally – so they can continue to live and work in their communities. The Western Australian Department of Education and Training (WA DET) and the Commonwealth Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) have funded the project, enabling the University to provide mentoring support and provision for Recognition of Prior Learning, on a case-by-case basis, depending on their individual experience and levels of skill. On completion of the course students will be fully qualified to teach from Kindergarten to Year 7. Added to this they will be able to bring their own knowledge of their unique communities, languages and cultures to their teaching.

Introduction

The Kimberley and Pilbara regions in Western Australia's North West face enormous challenges in achieving both UNESCO's 'Education For All' Millennium Goals and the more recent Australian 'Closing the Gap' campaign objectives. (UNESCO, 2009; Close the Gap Coalition, 2009). To this end, recent State and Commonwealth Government initiatives have highlighted the importance of Early Childhood Education and the development of Early Childhood Teacher workforce strategies as critical components in any attempt to redress educational inequities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in rural and remote areas (Australian Government, 2008, COAG, 2008; DEEWR, 2009). This paper investigates a Western Australian North West Early Childhood and Primary Teacher Workforce Development Strategy being implemented by Murdoch University in collaboration with the Western Australian Department of Education and Training and the Commonwealth Government. The strategy builds on previous research and includes the articulation of an individualised Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process, Mentoring support, University and School partnerships and the opportunity for External study. The strategy is aimed at developing career pathways for Australian Indigenous Education Officers (AIEOs), Teacher Assistants (TAs) and Child Care Workers to become Early Childhood teachers working in and for the Pilbara and Kimberley regions of Western Australia.

Recognition of Prior Learning – A Contentious Issue

A key feature of this program is the development and implementation of an RPL process for the applicants. Determining the extent to which, if any, AIEOs, TAs or Child Care Workers should be awarded credit for experiences gained through working in schools and/or their communities, however, remains a contentious issue for Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers, Teacher Unions, Professional Associations and Registration Authorities.

While processes for awarding RPL in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector are seemingly firmly entrenched, it appears that some Faculties of Education within Australian universities continue to be slow on the up take. Note there are a variety of terms and acronyms used internationally to refer to the recognition of prior learning gained either through formal or informal settings. RPL is the acronym most commonly used in Australia. On the other hand, current drives for the awarding of RPL, at least partly fuelled by teacher shortages across Australia, have lead some Education Faculties to develop 'fast track' programs, many of which include significant amounts of RPL.

Controversy revolves around the extent to which RPL might undermine the academic quality of ITE programs and the professionalism of teaching. Others point to practical concerns about how to measure skills gained in non-formal learning situations, who among academic staff are skilled to do such assessments and how much the administration of RPL procedures will cost already under funded Faculties of Education. Proponents of RPL, alternatively, argue that non-formal learning, acquired in the workplace or community, should be valued and rewarded as legitimate, relevant and inclusive forms of knowledge.

Defining Recognition of Prior Learning

RPL in the Australian context was defined, by the then Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), when it was introduced in Australia as part of the Australian Qualifications Framework in 1993.

> Recognition of prior learning (RPL) means recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred. Under the AQTF, competencies may be attained in a number of ways. This includes through any combination of formal or informal training and education, work experience or general life experience (ANTA, 2001, p.9. In Fox, 2005, p. 356).

More recently the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Committee (2004) has sort to clarify the previously "blurred" boundaries between RPL and Credit Transfer by defining RPL as:

> An assessment process that assesses the *individual's* non-formal and informal learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification.

This is opposed to Credit Transfer which:

> Assesses the initial course or subject that the individual is using to claim access to, or the award of credit in, the destination course to determine the extent to which it is equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards in qualification.

For the purposes of this paper, it is the non-credentialed or non-formal learning that has occurred in the workplace (e.g. schools or childcare centres) or the community that is of interest, rather than that which may have been gained more formally through TAFEs or Higher Education Institutions

(HEIs). Teacher Assistants, for example, who have gained a Certificate IV (Teacher Assistant), generally gain access to Bachelor level Initial Teacher Education programs. In some cases they may be awarded Advanced Standing for some units based on this formal qualification but they may or may not be given any further credit for whole or parts of units based on their experience working in schools and/or their linguistic and cultural knowledge.

What is driving the RPL movement(s)?

As can be seen from a review of the literature below, the awarding of RPL beyond simple credit transfer can be a contentious issue where competing agendas collide. The recognition and accreditation of prior knowledge and learning gained either through life experiences, the workplace or other non-formal educational contexts, fits within the broad framework of Experiential Based Learning (EBL). Within this framework it is assumed that experience is the foundation of, and stimulus for, learning (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1993. In Andresen, Boud and Cohen, 2000, p. 225). One of the characteristic features of this approach to learning, according to Kolb (1984, in Andresen et al, 2000, p.226) is recognition and active use of the learner's relevant life experiences within learning and assessment programs.

Various theoretical approaches including Human Rights / Development, Critical and Feminist pedagogy have promoted a broadening of understanding and acceptance of what constitutes learning and how it may be acquired (UNESCO's Faure Report, 1972 and Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986, in Andresen et al, 2000, p. 231). Support for the concept of RPL has also emerged from within Human Capital national education and training agendas in Australia and elsewhere. In Australia, RPL first found its practical application amidst the Accord struck between the trade union movement and the Labor Federal Government in the 1980s. A key strategy, central to this Accord, was national economic restructuring of skills development and transference, particularly in secondary production. The merging of these two divergent approaches was significant in driving the RPL movement according to Andresen et al (2000, p.234):

> The acknowledgement by government, educational providers and workplaces that RPL is an equity matter, as well as according with training reform agendas, legitimised EBL beyond its informal and community roots.

In this respect, Briere (2005) identifies three broad perspectives on RPL – technical/market, liberal/humanist and critical/radical. From the technical/market perspective, RPL is an efficient and cost effective way to address urgent national and international skill shortages. As an example, the current undersupply of teachers in Australia is well documented and likely to continue as baby boomers retire. In response to such skill shortages, Noonan (2005), for example, has called for an effective national "workforce development strategy" which includes a coordinated approach to RPL.

In the context of teacher supply issues, various state governments have sought alternative (often shorter) teacher education programs to meet on-going teacher shortages. Green, Randall & Francis (2004) describe one of these developed by Charles Sturt University (CSU) in response to the New South Wales Department of Education and Training's call for universities to develop alternate pathways for industry trained people to enter teaching as a career. The Accelerated Teacher Training Program (ATTP) was designed specifically to address the shortage of Technology and Applied Studies (TAS) teachers in NSW. Students with relevant trade qualifications, significant industry experience, evidence of further learning and showing a pre disposition to life long learning were selected by interview and offered places in the program. These students were awarded 2 years (out of four) prior

learning for their industry experience. Such initiatives have more recently been supported by the Federal government through such strategies as the Teach for Australia initiative (Gillard, J. 2009).

From a different paradigm, critical and emancipatory perspectives, view RPL as a strategy for social redress enabling marginalized individuals and groups to not only gain access to academe but to have "the multiple learnings" gained in life, community or work valued. Recognition of, and for, indigenous knowledges, womens' knowledges and worker knowledge, for example, challenge the privileging of academic knowledge gained in institutions. In contrast to the technical/market view which credit knowledge that is recognized as equivalent to specific program objectives, within the critical paradigm, RPL procedures should also value knowledge that is divergent to knowledge found inside academe (Michelson, 1996, in Breier, 2005).

In a similar vein, Mcleod (2000) argues that teacher education should acknowledge the totality of the experience each student brings with them, to value their lived experiences as a supplement to theory through reflection. This is because she considers teachers' work to be a highly contextualized social act, which involves continually negotiating language and power structures at the individual, class, school and society levels. In particular teachers' work requires communication skills beyond the classroom. McLeod (2000) notes partnerships between teachers, students and parents are unique because each brings its own biographical history, different views of schooling, different expectations of the role of parent, teacher and child to the communicative act. McLeod (2000) argues that it is "lived experiences" before, during and after teacher education that contribute to a teacher's ability to negotiate these complex and contextually unique social acts. Whilst RPL has the potential to validate these lived experiences, ITE programs must also make a commitment to allow space in their programs to cultivate this knowledge gained from experience. Developing RPL processes underpinned by a critical theory, would clearly require a much more complex process than one in which behaviorist type outcomes are matched to existing units and courses.

Breier (2005) suggests that for RPL processes to meet more than technical / market driven agendas they require changes in curriculum and pedagogy to accommodate the students' prior experiences. Academics and students will need to make space for critical reflections on prior learning including explicit connection being made between informal learning and the formal knowledge in the course. Taylor & Clemans (2000, p. 264) see that RPL "is the logical consequence of the theory of experiential learning". This form of learning posited by Kolb (1983) and others has challenged the notion that academic learning is the only form of real learning and argues that real learning which involves reflection and active experimentation can take place in informal settings. The problem arises in the application of this theory in determining what counts as worthwhile or appropriate learning in terms of the program the applicant is entering and how can this be measured.

Harris (1999, in Breier, 2005) is cautionary regarding RPL. She suggests that adult learning, gained though experience, should not be just 'taken for granted' but needs to be situated within the unequal power structures that exist in society. She proposes that such learning needs to be challenged and explored through critical dialogue as part of any reconceptualisation of RPL. Similarly Brookfield (1998, in Breier 2005) contends that there is no basis for assuming that all prior knowledge is positive, especially if it remains unexamined. Bias, prejudice and habits need to be critically reflected upon within the context of the society and economy in which they are formed.

Issues for the Faculties of Education

The practical application of the principles of RPL has presented challenges to adult educators across the education and training sectors in Australia and globally. As well as attempting to develop, or modify, tertiary courses to incorporate practical learning such as practicum and internships, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have also sought ways to 'measure' prior learning in order to give appropriate accreditation for parts or all of a course. These attempts to measure often lead to the development of an inventory of 'skills lists', which lead to debates about the legitimacy and appropriateness of such lists to adequately represent the complexity of knowledge and understandings in many professions. There were also issues as to how to enable people to demonstrate that they had acquired the competencies required in the courses from which they sought exemption. Exams, interviews, resumes and increasingly portfolios, were among the methods trialled.

Taylor and Clemans' (2000) study of procedures and protocols for RPL in Education Faculties in the late 1990s postulated that the slow up take of RPL programs in Universities may in part be attributed to its apparent low – status having originated in the Vocational Education sector and therefore being tainted with competency-based notions. Keating (2006) and Milne, L., Glaisher, S., Keating S. (2006) have identified this binary between the university and TAFE sectors as a continuing problem potentially blocking successful TAFE / University learning pathways. Taylor & Clemans (2000, p. 270) found, however, that while many staff (particularly those not involved directly with RPL administrative processes) may not have a deep understanding of it, for those Education faculties that had RPL processes in place most academic staff reported an acceptance of an RPL process.

Administrative costs, also, cannot be ignored in this equation. Effectively coordinating and implementing an RPL process that meet the needs of students and staff requires funding for workload and training. This needs to be juxtaposed against the economic reality that for every unit a student is given RPL for there is a reduction in fees to the university. If RPL is to become a part of Noonan's nationally coordinated workforce development strategy, then national and state governments need to acknowledge this financial cost. Academically, too, RPL has implications for academics in terms of the value of their courses. If the knowledge can be learned elsewhere then is there a need for the unit to exist? This question sits amongst already overcrowded and competing curriculum agendas in universities.

Impact on students

Clearly the possibility of RPL is attractive for some students as it is cost effective in terms of time and money. As well, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Advisory Board, 2004 notes in its preamble that:

> By removing the need for duplication of learning, RPL encourages individuals to continue upgrading their skills and knowledge through structured education and training towards formal qualifications and improved employment outcomes.

However, there are concerns raised in the literature about the impact that awarding RPL may have on the students' potential for successful learning in a university environment.

In the application of RPL, some universities have applied market driven principles and approaches that see it as a means to increase student numbers but have not paid sufficient attention to the characteristics of adult learners which are significant factors in the appropriate implementation of RPL. As a result, Fox (2005) asserts that justification for RPL may simply be a "white elephant" in

Australian universities that promises much but delivers little (p 354). Despite the lure of equity and equal opportunities for marginalized groups who may benefit from having their life and work experiences recognized, the reality and practice of RPL "paints a very different picture" (Fox, 2005, p. 359). In large part Fox (2005, p. 360) sees this as being caused by inconsistent and often subjective RPL processes in universities where assessment decisions are made by program coordinators with little or know training or industry experience.

Taylor and Clemans' (2000), research into the provision of RPL among Australian Faculties of Education, found that problems can arise if applicants are awarded RPL for introductory units because they do not necessarily have the theoretical background for the next stage or level. This can greatly disadvantage students as they progress through their course. Instead, Taylor & Clemans (2000), recommended sealing some core units from RPL and perhaps only awarding RPL for later stages so the students have the opportunity to develop the theoretical underpinnings of the course. They also commend universities to ask the big questions – such as what is the purpose of what they teach and which subjects can or can't be offered for RPL (Taylor and Clemans, 2000, p. 278).

MacPherson and Brooking (1992), in their study of the implementation of Assessment and Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) at a New Zealand College of Education found that, based on advice from the APL Officer appointed to assist students with their applications, many students self selected out of the RPL process (MacPherson and Brooking, 1992, p. 6). The students cited career concerns, university status, personal learning priorities and concerns about their academic abilities as reasons. Some students in this study, for example, were concerned that future employers would not recognise their qualifications if they did not complete the whole course. Others felt they needed to learn as much as possible especially if they had been out of a formal study environment for a long time

Cantwell and Scevak (2004) conducted a study of 33 male students from an industrial background who, through RPL, were fast tracked through a two (rather than four) year teacher education degree. They found that, for many of the students surveyed, elements of their prior learning experiences in a TAFE or workplace context served to "act as a point of disjuncture ….by imposing limits on epistemological possibilities driving the students learning" (Cantwell and Scevak, 2004, p. 143). As a group, the RPL students preferred practical rather than propositional knowledge and retained a belief in the structural simplicity and certainty of knowledge. Thirty percent of the students in this study failed and Cantwell & Scevak posit individual, structural and cultural factors as possible reasons. Significantly, they argue that time is required for students to modify their belief systems about learning and knowledge and shift from surface to deep learning. With these students, the time frame of their course was 50 % less than non-RPL students and this was considered to be structural factor that perhaps aggravated their ability to change their beliefs and approaches to learning to suit the university environment.

Cantwell & Scevak (2004) speculate, also, that the student experiences in hierarchical, male dominated workplaces and technically oriented educational settings may have impacted on their ability to engage with academic demands of university study. As a result of the limited time frame and the unmodified curriculum they would not have had the opportunity to deconstruct these entrenched beliefs about learning and society. Cantwell & Scevak (2004) call for the provision of preparatory or bridging programs to induct RPL students into university learning and on going support in the form of workshops or study groups where the "metacognitive knowledge" the students bring with them can be critiqued and the differing expectations of university learning scaffolded.

Findings from a Case Study

The initial research for this study was conducted as part of a Doctorate in Education thesis (Price, 2005). Using qualitative approaches, this research examined the journey of three TAs though a Bachelor of Education course. Lewin's concept of 'driving' and 'restraining' forces was used to identify factors that either assisted or created barriers to them completing the course (1952). In particular the research aimed to examine the factors that impacted on the TAs' engagement with the ITE program, from their point of view. The research methodology included a grounded qualitative case study. The research began by using Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). A variety of research strategies were then used to gather data that closely reflect what is going on in the field. As Kellehear (1993, p. 22) puts it:

Grounded Theory seeks to develop explanation from ideas and experiences suggested by the social system itself rather than simply from the academic's discourse.

Data collection strategies included informal open-ended interviews, participant narrative journal writing, regular field notes from researcher observations, and the collection of relevant written documents. The three primary participants in this case study were selected because they were working as TAs in a remote and culturally diverse school where the researcher also worked and because they had recently enrolled in an ITE program at a mainland Australian university. Other participants (such as mentors and school administrators) were not selected or 'pre-determined' but were naturally included if and when they became significant in the study. As a result, there was "an on going inclusion of individuals and groups" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 50). Regular field notes were made as events unfolded in relation to their course, their home life, their workloads and their struggles for study leave and other forms of support.

Very early on in the research initial hunches were re-organised and re-prioritised. As expected, issues soon emerged that had not been considered significant by the researcher given the mono-cultural lens through which she was looking. In the first years, informal open-ended interviews with the TAs took place once a fortnight. Follow up interviews explored themes that emerged over time. Throughout the study, the participants were regularly asked to comment and reflect on themes identified by researcher. This enabled the researcher to adjust themes and identify significant categories based on the participants' points of view. As a participant in the development of the program the researcher was privy to events as they unfolded. These 'critical incidents' were recorded in regular field notes (Tripp, 1993) as they occurred throughout the research period.

Data were analysed in order to extract, in an interconnected and holistic way, the significant factors that (from the point of view of the participants, 'significant others' and the researcher) impacted on the EAs' engagement with the ITE program. After interviews and observations the participants were consulted to see if they agreed with the researcher's interpretations. In this way meanings attached to themes more closely reflected the beliefs and understandings of the participants. Principles of discourse theory informed this process (Gee, 1999). The trustworthiness of the data and analysis in this research is connected to how well the researcher can reflect the insider's point of view. Lofland (in Patton, 1990, p. 398) says that a good test of observer/researcher constructions is to see if the participants recognise them. Finally the participants, as individuals and then as a group, were asked to prioritise the factors that they felt had acted as 'driving' and 'restraining' forces in their ability to engage with the ITE program (Lewin, 1952). They were then asked to rank them as to whether they considered them high, medium or low factors. The participants were then asked to prioritise the properties of each significant factor they had identified as significant. The research found that the ability to study externally and remain in their communities, mentoring, access to Recognition of Prior Learning and the

school – university partnership were the 'high driving' forces enabling them to achieve their goal of becoming fully qualified teachers.

The North West Early Childhood and Primary Teacher Workforce Development Strategy

The North West Early Childhood Teacher Development program builds on the knowledge and experience gained from the previous program. Applicants who submitted an Expression of Interest for the program, were first selected by the university's project team on the basis of their prior work experience or academic qualifications. The majority of those selected had a minimum Certificate IV. Some had Diplomas which gave them Advanced Standing toward a number of units.

Two academic staff visited the Pilbara and Kimberley very early in the semester and provided an induction orientation session for each student. They then developed Individual Study Plans for the applicants based on preliminary interviews. The study plans outlined the units to be taken each semester and possible units for which they could apply for RPL throughout the course of their studies. As all the applicants worked full or part time and most had family and community commitments their study plans suggested that, at least initially, they undertake only two units per semester. The students could increase this number once they gained confidence with their introductory units. This approach was based on our belief in the importance of introductory units in laying the foundation for university study.

The students were provided an RPL application package which outlined how they could apply. The process involved their submission of a portfolio demonstrating how their prior work experiences met the outcomes and objectives of specific units. They were encouraged to begin collecting evidence such as sample lessons they had planned and delivered, letters of endorsement from administration staff and certificates from PD. Members of the project team and locally based teacher mentors would provide on going assistance in the development of portfolios. As well as reducing their unit load the RPL process became a mechanism for valuing the work they were undertaking in their schools and communities. It also provided them a process for critical reflections on their non – formal learning particularly as they related this to their academic study.

An integral part of the program has been the provision of mentoring support from local teachers. Students self selected a mentor teacher from their community who was paid to assist them on a regular basis. Mentors were provided PD by members of the project team. The type and style of mentoring was, however, not fixed or premeditated but allowed to develop and grow as the need arose. This approach draws on the work of MacCallum (2007) who argues that definitions and conceptualizations of mentoring vary widely in the literature. These range from an expert-novice relationship or apprenticeship model to those that view mentoring as a partnership (Martin, 2000) or a shared adventure (Baird, 1993). Genzuk describes the role of the mentors in the programmes he studied as:

> Catalysts, cheerleaders, trainers and problem solvers and (they) are expected to deal with extremely personal concerns, as well as a wide diversity of educational issues and problems that may surface in their work (as cited in Becket, 1993, p. 27.

It is this broad view of mentoring that this program promotes.

The role of the university project team was also significant as it enabled them to provide a direct link between the participants and the university. They were able to assist the students with enrolment problems, navigating on line unit materials and developing an understanding of university procedures. They were also able to liaise with academic staff and keep them informed of the program

and the participants. In some cases they were able to negotiate adapted assignments to suit the context of the participants. This also built on the findings of previous research that showed the necessity for strong coordination of such programs in order to foster and maintain close links between schools and the university (Price 2005). Another key factor in the success of the program was that there were small groups of students enrolled in the program in each town. During the first program team visit the students were brought together informally. From this the students developed learning circles where they met regularly to assist each other.

By the end of the first semester of the project, 10 students from across the Kimberley and Pilbara had successfully passed the units in which they were enrolled. Two of the students were AIEOs, five were TAs and three were Child Care Workers. Further funding for the project from both the WA DET and the Commonwealth DEEWR facilitated Stage Two of the project where a second round of applicants were recruited to commence in Semester Two, 2009 or Semester One 2010. Project team members again visited the Kimberley and Pilbara to recruit participants for this second stage. Following these informal face to face meetings in each town and as word spread about the program, increasing numbers of AIEO's, TAs and Child Care Workers began to make inquiries about the program. As a result of this second recruitment drive a further 18 Expressions of Interest were received. During follow up visits Mentoring Professional Development Workshops were held in each of the major centres. Individual Study Plans were again drawn up for each student depending on their past experience and their work, family and community commitments. The Stage Two recruits were introduced to Stage One participants and joined their Learning Circles – the latter group were more than happy to share their Semester One experiences with the new group of students. By mid way through Semester Two there were between two and five students in Broome, Karratha, Port Hedland and Newman. Expressions of Interest had been received from cohorts of students in Derby, Fitzroy Valley, Halls Creek, Kununurra and Wyndham for commencement in 2010.

Conclusions

This project has been successful to date in attracting applicants who would normally not have considered university study as an option. The strategy builds on current theories and experience of RPL debates and mentoring processes to provide the extra support needed for this cohort of students living as they do in isolated communities.

The development of RPL processes is not a simple matter. Awarding credit for uncredentialled or non-formal learning poses problems and possibilities for Teacher Education programs, students and the broader education system. In its most simple application RPL processes have the potential to address teacher supply issues and provide career pathways for TAs, AIEOs and Child Care Workers, many of whom may not other wise have the opportunity for a university qualification. RPL also clearly recognises skills and knowledge gained outside and often undervalued by academe including indigenous, women's and worker's knowledges. This cohort of students has the potential to bring these knowledges to the fore in their university studies and eventually their teaching practice.

An ongoing focus of the project is to increasingly find ways to respect and value the knowledges of the students without undermining the quality and rigour of the program. Upon graduation these students will work in one of the most challenging teaching environments in Australia. The significance of their role as competent and confident Early Childhood teachers in laying strong educational foundations for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students living in rural and remote communities cannot be underestimated. Undermining the quality of their program would be a

disservice to them and their communities and potentially lead to a widening rather than 'Closing of the Gap'.

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