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The event aimed to showcase human capital related research from a range of disciplines and was a part of the emerging researchers initiative of Eidos Institute and its partners.

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CONTENTS

VALUING THE MINDS OF THE YOUNG

Karen Maras, Australian Catholic University

Pages 5 - 10

INVESTING IN HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Nicki Brake, Australian Catholic University

Pages 11 - 15

PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Dr Karen Noble, University of Southern Queensland

Pages 17 - 23

CHANGING PLACES, CHANGING PEDAGOGY

Debbie Kember, Queensland University of Technology

Pages 25 - 30

THE GROWING VALUE OF LIVES

Evan Yabsley, Central Queensland University

Pages 31 - 36

FROM INVISIBILITY TO INCLUSIVITY

Dr Ruth Bridgstock, Queensland University of Technology

Pages 37 - 42

ISSUES IN INDIGENOUS LITERACY POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN QUEENSLAND SCHOOLS

Pauline Taylor, James Cook University

Pages 43 - 47

QUEENSLAND'S FUTURE

Helen Boon, James Cook University

Pages 49 - 56

RETENTION AND FIRST YEAR B. ED. STUDENTS' MENTAL MODELS OF THEMSELVES AS UNIVERSITY LEARNERS

Trang Nguyen, James Cook University

Pages 57 - 61

UNTITLED SUBMISSION

Carolyn Timms, James Cook University

Pages 57 - 61

THREE IMPERATIVES

Karen Hawkins, University of Southern Queensland

Pages 71 - 76

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PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Community capacity building in early childhood education across the local context

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Karen Noble is Program Co-ordinator: Early Childhood Education at the University of Southern Queensland. Her research has focused on hearing the multiple voices of stakeholders in early childhood care and education and building human and social capital in such contexts. More recently her work has been around challenging orthodoxy in practitioner preparation, student engagement in learning and communities of practice. Her second doctoral study is focusing on workplace bullying in early childhood education contexts.

ABSTRACT

Concern about beginning teachers' transition from pre-service education into the profession continues to be a major issue for all stakeholders involved with the education sector (Hultqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Moss, 2003; Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2000). This paper outlines a conceptual approach adopted in a local context to enhance transition and build capacity within the early childhood community for both pre-service and in-service teachers. The author posits that although the initial preparation and induction of beginning teachers is a well-researched area, there is a growing frustration due to a lack of constructive and comprehensive change. These beginning years lay the foundation for the rest of their careers as educators. Although these beginning practitioners have undertaken substantial study, usually in the form of a four-year undergraduate degree program, resoundingly, the literature states that they are ill prepared for their chosen career as a teacher (Commonwealth Government, 2003).

Within the local Darling Downs context, local early childhood practitioners participate in a program of professional conversations and workshops that focus on investigating the understandings and dispositions of developing and enhancing professional identity. This Early Childhood Education community of practice (ECE CoP) approach is developed around a distinct socio-cultural pedagogy that places the emphasis on using multiple perspectives to understand and inform practice across various contexts. Such an approach is intent on developing and maintaining personal and professional resilience in preparing early childhood teachers for work in contemporary contexts by exploring identified and emerging issues affecting the professional identity of teachers across various ECE contexts. Students across professional experiences, professional experience liaison and academic staff, early childhood teachers and administrators work together to explore identified and emerging issues for the profession.

Through the processes of capacity building and the privileging of critical reflection in-action and on-action, this investigation becomes a space whereby all participants experiment, try out ideas, take risks, tackle and puzzle over problems, think, reflect, listen, discuss, ask questions and surprise themselves and one another. Post-structuralist theory will be the main overarching theory used as the underpinning theoretical framework as it fits the notion of challenging taken-for-granted assumptions and meta-narratives asking how things might be otherwise (Foucault, 1979, 1985). Additionally, post-structuralist theory allows space for the consideration of multiple perspectives and acknowledges that long held truths are contingent upon discursive context. Thus, the use of this theory will enable new and alternative understandings and practices to be opened up for consideration. This framework promotes the notion of being informed by multiple perspectives in theory and in practice.

PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Community capacity building in early childhood education across the local context

INTRODUCTION

Working with children and families in the current societal context has become increasingly problematic (Gardner, 1999, 2003; Prout, 2003), with research indicating that this can be attributed to the uncertainty, discontinuity and insecurity characteristic of the post-modern condition (Hulqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Jenks, 1996a, 1996b; Lyotard, 1984; Prout, 2003). Concomitantly, the complexities of current policy reform, the demands of neo-liberal approaches to the provision of care and education (Ball, 2003; Beck, 1999; Hulqvist & Dahlberg, 2001; Noble & Macfarlane, 2005; Popkewitz, 2000; Rose, 2000) and a lack of understanding of current contexts for children and their families can be seen to compound the present state of play across the sector (Moss, 2003; Prout, 2003). Although there is an awareness of the plight of struggling beginning teachers, across Australia, evidence suggests that, to date, any attempts to redress the current "state of play" have been less than effective. Historically, the teaching profession is notorious for having high attrition rates (Brock & Grady, 1996) and this remains the case today.

Given this contextual orientation, the preparation of graduates to work effectively in the early childhood field is increasingly challenging as this broad field continues to provide graduates with many opportunities to work in increasingly diverse settings providing services to young children and their families. Indeed, graduates entering the workforce could find themselves working in unfamiliar ECEC contexts. As such, preparatory university programs of study need to reflect these changes and ensure that degree programs offered do indeed meet the ever-changing needs of the students who enrol, providing them with the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions that are transferable across the broad ECE sector. The aim of this research agenda at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) then is to develop a better understanding of why beginning teachers find it difficult to transition into their increasingly complex and demanding profession, which is imperative to building the social capital within the profession. As a beginning point, a space has been created within the curriculum framework where academics, students and beginning and experienced ECE teachers can explore this phenomenon.

The design and implementation of university courses provide a curriculum challenge for the promotion of social capital across the field. Within the ECE undergraduate programs at USQ, there is a desire to challenge long-established assumptions about the multidisciplinary nature of this work in relation to professional identity development in pre-service practitioner preparation. Of crucial importance is the identification of the skills, knowledge and abilities necessary to enhance capacity across the sector. With this in mind, all courses aim to provide students with an intellectual platform from which it might prove possible to explore and respond to such complex working conditions and agendas in the future. However, what is advocated here is the privileging of a discursive space in which pre-service teachers can explore the theory/practice nexus and build social and professional relationships that connect them to the field from the outset.

This paper argues that provision must be made for practitioners to develop continually and sustain the knowledge, skills and dispositions relevant to their work in such complex times. This argument then suggests that both internal and external professional development opportunities are necessary. In this instance, a community of practice (CoP) strategy adopted in a localised context is explored as a means of developing social and professional connects among ECE pre-service and in-service practitioners.

A CoP is formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Within a CoP, participants share a concern or a passion for something that they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. CoPs have become associated with knowledge management as people have begun to see them as ways of developing social capital, nurturing new knowledge, stimulating innovation or sharing existing tacit knowledge within an organisation (Wenger, 1998). A community of practice (CoP) can therefore play an important role in personal and professional identity development.

The focus of this paper is on just one aspect of the undergraduate curriculum reform within early childhood education (ECE) at USQ designed to enhance the social capacity of beginning ECE teachers in the local context. Specifically, this paper interrogates the nature of pedagogical connectedness in exploration of understanding the

engagements between academic staff and students that impact positively on student learning in the ECE CoP context. In the interrogation of pedagogical connectedness, the mediated and relational nature of interactions in this reconceptualised curriculum delivery is explored. However, in order to contextualise this investigation, it needs to be acknowledged that the academic staff members in this context have taken significant risks in order to engage with the notion of communities of practice. It has taken considerable commitment to work in this collaborative manner, providing the ECE CoP beyond the traditional boundaries of course delivery and requiring academics to adopt new ways of 'knowing' and 'doing' in many instances. Such an initiative has been undertaken in conjunction with a Problem based learning (PBL) Connected Curriculum re-design.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Today all graduates are required to be self-directed learners and possess lifelong learning skills, regardless of their chosen profession. As such, they need to engage as critical thinkers and reflectors who are analytical in their approach to solving problems regardless of their chosen field. Specifically, the concern here is with the complex and interdisciplinary nature of work with young children and their families. More than ever before, the beginning ECE teacher needs to be able to integrate knowledge and skills from a number of disciplines as well as have the interpersonal skills to be effective team members. Teacher preparation courses that are narrowly focused are unable to support adequately the training and ongoing professional development necessary to produce early childhood teachers who are well-prepared for their work with young children. This initiative reconceptualised the way in which the curriculum is developed and implemented across the ECE program at USQ. Utilising a PBL approach to the development of a connected curriculum is responding to the need to: enhance student retention; provide a more student-centred focus; encourage a flexible approach to teaching and learning; initiate and lead enterprise within the early childhood field; develop within students the ability to analyse and evaluate critically theory and practice across the curriculum; and utilise many aspects of generic skill development in students, including problem-solving, working effectively as members of teams, reflection, evaluation, assessment and participation in decision-making processes.

Furthermore, across the higher education sector, academics are confronted by economic rationalism with the demand that costs be cut and numbers being taught increased (Ramsden, 1992). Traditionally, technical-rational models have also guided much curriculum development and delivery in higher education and, in recent times, such approaches have been

increasingly scrutinised in terms of their inability to prepare beginning teachers adequately for the challenging social contexts in which their work is to be undertaken. Specifically, such approaches are seen to be deficit in terms of not enabling students to transverse the theory/practice nexus. Rather, as Korthagen (2001 as cited in Edwards & Hammer, 2006) argues, a more effective approach to teacher education is required to provide beginning teachers with opportunities to construct understandings of practice which draw on relevant theory to inform understandings of the teaching and learning process. It is the complexity of the issues that have been raised that requires us to review the appropriateness and value of various teaching practices and to develop a curriculum approach that is better situated to meet these competing demands of academics, students and higher education institutions in general.

PBL is one such teaching approach that is changing the way that many higher education teaching faculties are approaching the teaching of both undergraduate and postgraduate courses (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980; Boud & Feletti, 1997; Duch, 1996; Evensen & Hmelo, 2000; Hughes, 1997; Savin-Baden, 2001). While this approach was first used in the teaching of medical students in North America during the 1960s and 1970s, it has now evolved into a general teaching ideology or framework (Savin-Baden, 2001) used in many different fields or disciplines. It is a learning approach that draws on established principles of pedagogical effectiveness including student engagement, active learning, social interaction and learner relevance.

The main tenets of PBL are to encourage self-directed learning in students, leading to higher motivation; better retention of material and the development of important reasoning and problem-solving skills; and for students to develop a better understanding of group processes and skills necessary for successful working collaborations. This approach to course development and implementation has been considered an important means of exposing beginning teachers to situations that they are likely to face in their professional lives. By employing constructivist and social constructivist learning theory (Ahlfeldt, Mehta & Sellnow, 2005; Dean, 1999), the PBL approach supports students to acquire theoretical concepts related to practice, as well as the development of strong interpersonal skills associated with working in professional contexts (Facione, Facione & Gainen, 1995; Kolb, 1984; Murray-Harvey & Slee, 2000), encouraging a deep approach to learning (Marton & Saljo, 1984).

Within this connected curriculum framework, problems serve as the context and the stimulus for learning. The content of the curriculum then is to be organised around these problems, not around disciplines or individual course materials. Students will work in small, collaborative groups,

PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Community capacity building in early childhood education across the local context

Dr Karen Noble, University of Southern Queensland

and take responsibility for their own learning. The problems are to be presented in a variety of formats, including video footage, written and verbal scenarios, as well as in a range of other stimulus materials and artifacts that enable the facilitator to establish the context for learning. By the use of intrinsic engagement of students in the subject matter and the encouragement of self-directed, progressive and active learning to resolve the problem, effective learning habits and professional engagement are promoted. Clearly, the purpose of the problem is to pose a practical dilemma that provides the opportunity to explore both theory and practice. Therefore the design and selection of the problems are crucial to the success of this connected curriculum initiative. The problems must challenge the students to go beyond the known, and encourage them to engage within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1987). Such an approach requires a reconceptualisation of the notion of mastery. That is, students display their understandings, knowledges and skills through the development of connected and multidisciplinary approaches to exploration of the theory and practice. Such a process is understood as vital to enhancing the social capital of individuals who are entering an intellectually demanding work context where sustainability and lifelong learning processes are vital.

Students participate in intensive face-to-face periods scheduled at the commencement and in the middle of the semester, along with weekly integrated tutorials and professional conversations with experienced practitioners and academics. These sessions are to be video-recorded and made available to external students, along with the relevant written problems and materials. Throughout the semester, all students (regardless of their enrolment or offer) will be engaged in regular professional conversations, in person and/or virtually. As well as the technological provision of WebCT support, a specifically designed early childhood WIKI is integral to delivery of this connected curriculum where students are one 'connected' cohort. This tool then becomes the virtual vehicle that assists to drive student and academic involvement in the social dynamic associated with the 'community of practice' approach to ongoing exploration, investigation and learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). For this aspect of the connected curriculum to be beneficial to all stakeholders, it "crucially involves participation as a way of learning – of both absorbing and being absorbed in – the culture of practice. An extended period of legitimate peripherality provides learners with opportunities to make the culture of practice theirs" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 95).

DISCUSSION OF LOCAL CONTEXT

The CoP within the undergraduate ECE programs at USQ seems to be emerging in a complex and multi-layered fashion. Professional dialogue is privileged within the ECE CoP, encouraging all key stakeholders to explore the theory-practice nexus in every interaction. Therefore, communication is essential to the ongoing growth of this process of professional identity development. Within this context, professional learning opportunities exist for academic staff members, experienced practitioners and students through ongoing professional collaboration. In what follows the initial experiences of key stakeholders are explored in order to explore the processes of pedagogical connectedness that empower and encourage students on the journey to becoming 'teacher'.

What is developing is a situation where the academic staff members responsible for initiating this development ensure that there is an efficient and multi-faceted feedback loop of communication at all times. This feedback loop functions in a significant way for all participants – staff and students alike – and provides a space for reflection in action and on action. The goal of this communication strategy is to lead ultimately to a sense of enhanced social capacity and a climate of collaboration. It is apparent in exploring key issues raised in the feedback loop that staff and students must have the capacity and the will to embrace the change. The academic staff members involved recognise that resistance to change acts to obstruct pedagogical connectedness and as such continually engage with one another as well as with the students to create the space for change and potential transformation. The ECE CoP employs the process of critical reflection within the context of the PBL connected curriculum to bring about a sense of agency for the learner. As such, the contextual elements that are of significance are:

Interactions and relationships: All participants (facilitators and learners) have the responsibility to find out what they know and what they are capable of. Therefore, within in this learning context, effective communication processes must be established whereby it is acknowledged that all stakeholders have rights.

Rights and responsibilities: What the learner chooses to do in order to explore a particular issue is perfectly appropriate. There is no assumption that the learning outcomes be investigated in a prescriptive way. Neither should the learner be stressed by the processes of critical reflection. Therefore, the learner should have the right to explore experiences and knowledge as he/she so chooses. An expectation is that each learner is entitled to express his/her reactions to the learning tasks, but has a concomitant obligation to do so in an appropriate way. Therefore, rights are understood

to be reciprocal. All participants are made aware of the destabilisation and destruction that can occur when power over others occurs.

Choice: Within the connected curriculum context, the individual learner has the right to disagree with his/her peers in terms of how to engage with particular learning experiences, but there is equally an expectation that the other learners have the right to disagree and make choices in the same way. However, these choices are framed in terms of there being a joint responsibility to develop a greater awareness and understanding of how each person can work together to achieve the fullest potential of any given situation.

Belongingness: This tenet highlights the need for individual learners to feel safe and secure in their choice to engage with the learning outcomes in whatever way they choose. It is imperative that the participants develop a sense of belonging to the social learning context and that they understand their own subjectivity in terms of their learning dispositions. Belongingness then attends to the notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984).

Connectedness: Implicit in this approach is the fundamental need for learners to have interactions and relationships with others in order to form a network that supports their ongoing learning and development of professional identity. In this way, a sense of connectedness needs to exist for supportive networks to develop and for experiences to be meaningful. We aim to develop new kinds of bonds to become possible through the linking of the face-to-face and real time virtual community of practice, although participation is not mandated.

Together the application of these contextual elements impacts upon the quality of interactions, relationships and, in some cases, friendships that actually occur for the participants in the learning process. Agency cannot exist within relationships and practice unless there is a balancing of power relations and the presence of all characteristics (outlined in Figure 15). It is essential that the necessary professional skills and knowledge needed to work effectively with children and their families are central to the aims of this curriculum reconceptualisation, rather than a content-driven approach. New measures are called for in addressing the complexities of changed work/life demands and social contexts of higher education as traditional approaches to pre-service teacher education are proving ineffective and inefficient. Additionally, the contexts of practising teachers demand new kinds of competencies and that is the strength of PBL through a connected curriculum, as it integrates many elements regarded as essential in effective high quality learning and practice, such as self-directed, autonomous learning, critical and reflective thinking skills, and the integration of discipline specific knowledge and skills.

CONCLUSIONS: LISTENING TO MULTIPLE VOICES

This curriculum initiative involves academic staff and students co-constructing the extra-curricula curriculum as they focus on the core business of what it means to teach and to learn. This construction is carried out in a way that directly confronts the challenges of changing times and effective pedagogy, as previously outlined. It is apparent that such a shift is not deliverable without significant shifts in pedagogy. Equally, it becomes obvious that there are many more questions to be asked and that a significant amount of ongoing negotiation, cooperation and debate is required to continue developing and sustaining this ECE CoP. Relationships between academic staff, practitioners and students must also be recognised, supported and maintained.

High quality pedagogy depends on the professional capacities of academic staff as well as on the students. The importance of social connectedness is apparent from this interrogation of pedagogical connectedness. However, it is important to point out that what is being discussed is a model of professional learning and practice that is not necessarily one of friendship. Rather there is an emphasis on the mediated and relational nature of interactions, with recognition of the impact of the socioemotional aspect of building a sustainable CoP for all key stakeholder groups. What is highlighted is the significance of the emotional labour of becoming a teacher, and the individual investments by students in their ongoing professional identity should not be overlooked.

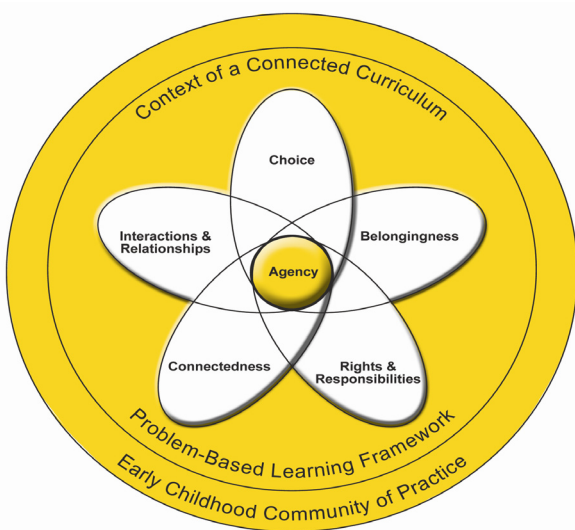


Figure 1: Context of a Connected Curriculum within a Community of Practice

Adapted from Noble, Macfarlane, & Cartmel (2005), p. 4

PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Community capacity building in early childhood education across the local context

Dr Karen Noble, University of Southern Queensland

While there have been initial attempts to engage experienced practitioners in the facilitation of regular ECE CoP sessions, this aspect of the program will be expanded through the active recruitment of members of the local early childhood teacher network, Toowoomba Early Childhood Community Group. The program is a means of engaging a broader cross section of practitioners as well as the community, which should strengthen the social capital of the early childhood profession. Acquiring sophisticated knowledge and developing a practice that is different from what teachers themselves experienced as students requires learning opportunities for teachers that are more powerful than simply reading and talking about new pedagogical ideas (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Teachers learn through engagement in processes of critical reflection in-action and on-action (Noble, et al., 2006), which is best achieved by looking closely at their work and sharing what they see. In order for all stakeholders to develop useful cognitive maps of the various theories, ideas and concepts and their interrelatedness, it is necessary to see how ideas connect across the different core curriculum areas. This kind of understanding provides a foundation for pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) and pedagogical connectedness.

Within the USQ local context, the CoP here is very much emergent and needs to be seen as a 'work in progress'. This paper has attempted to capture the essence of the experience of developing and implementing this professional development approach in terms of pedagogical connectedness. The overall perceptions from the feedback, from academic staff and students alike, is that this innovation is proving very successful and is assisting students to grow and develop both personally and professionally, demonstrating the future possibilities for enhancing social capital within the ECE field. With a strong focus on process, together staff and students work closely as a CoP to experiment, try out ideas, take risks, tackle and puzzle over problems, think, reflect, listen, discuss, ask questions and surprise themselves and one another. This will allow them to continually connect with pedagogy in ways that enable them, rather than constrain them, on their journeys of professional identity development in addition to their engagement with the more formal curriculum. Further research will also focus on the important influence that pre-service training (induction) can have on the professional growth and development that a graduate experiences once they have commenced their career. Through the ECE CoP it is hoped that these practitioners will remain committed to this critically reflective process and continue to be socially and professionally connected to this strategy. This would allow for ongoing data collection, as the views of beginning teachers about their pre-service education are important for universities to consider when they review how they go about providing their students with this initial orientation and preparation for life within a teaching profession.

What is apparent from engaging with emerging and experienced ECE practitioners is that graduation from a substantial program of pre-service teacher training needs to be viewed as merely the first stage in a multi-staged transition towards being a competent teacher. In this light, pre-service training programs and their agents are merely the first, and potentially the most important, support structure that a prospective teacher needs to encounter in their journey to competence. From this point of view, pre-service training could realistically be considered as a comprehensive program of pre-service induction. If university preparation was to be viewed not separate from, but as the initial step in a staged induction program, research into beginning teacher perceptions of their pre-service training would be more integrated with research on beginning teacher experiences at the workplace.

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