Shifting the focus in teacher education: Foregrounding the value of teacher/student relationships

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Abstract

Alternate or non-traditional educational settings within Australia have undergone a period of expansion over the last decade, yet there has not been any substantive recognition of this growth within teacher education programs (Plunkett & Dyson, 2010). However, since 2000 a research partnership that has been operating between one of Victoria's most innovative alternate educational settings - the School for Student Leadership (SSL) and Monash University, has attempted to redress the dearth of research into alternate settings and related potential change within Teacher Education. This paper reports on part of that ongoing longitudinal mixed method study, specifically highlighting the impact that reflection on practice, which is built into the program, has had on building positive relationships between staff and Year 9 students (Dyson & Plunkett, 2010). Findings support Mezirow's (1991) contention that transformative learning occurs as the result of the reflection process, which in turn leads to a shift in the role and nature of the teacher and allows for openness in communication with students, creating enhanced relationships. As acknowledged by both Cranton (2007) and Glasser (1998) the recognition of the importance of self and ones values and beliefs in relation to others is an essential part of learning. In particular we suggest that connectedness, especially between teacher and students, promotes active engagement concomitantly enhancing transformative learning. We propose that it is important that an understanding of these factors should foreground any discussions about future developments in teacher education.

Intro

The SSL began operating in 2000 as the Alpine School situated in Dinner Plain in the Victorian Alps. Since then two more campuses have opened - the Snowy River campus at Marlo in East Gippsland and Gnurad-Gundidj, near Camperdown in Victoria's Western District. The school provides a nine-week residential program for Year 9 students and aims to develop leadership skills and understandings through a community-learning model. Each school term at the 3 campuses begins with a new cohort of approximately 45 Year 9 students from across Victorian government secondary schools, taking no more than 4 students from any particular school. Each campus has 11 fulltime teaching staff plus support staff that work on a rostered basis to accommodate the residential requirements of the program.

A key focus of the SSL program is to assist adolescents to "understand themselves and their value to groups and communities to which they belong" (Alpine school Charter, 2004). Indeed, the residential nature of the program promotes integrated and authentic personal and community learning as students progressively take on more of the responsibility for managing and organising the community they live in over the term (Alpine School Charter, 2004). This program has achieved exceptional results in terms of student engagement and well being consistently scoring at or above the 95th percentile for this aspect (DEECD 2009 Annual Report). All students have opportunities to take formal leadership roles such as running meetings, managing the day-to-day running of the school and being actively involved in student governance. Additionally they participate in a large range of activities based on the unique environment including overnight bushwalks, white water rafting, and mountain biking, which are designed to encourage independence. The approach to curriculum design and delivery reflects many key ideas with respect to appropriate education for Year 9 students. It is the teaching team at the SSL who provide the expertise in the fields of student pastoral care, leadership, outdoor education, personal and physical development as well as student management and welfare. This holistic approach ensures a caring and secure environment, ongoing curriculum innovation and a dynamic and engaging educational program. Being a teacher in this

setting perhaps requires a different kind of teacher. Our research has been conducted to ascertain if this is the case and if current teacher education programs are preparing teachers for this type of role.

Literature review

As Australia approaches the second decade of the 21st century, like much of the western world they are entering yet another cycle of re-examining pre-service teacher education (PSTE) with the aim of making it more relevant to the evolving educational requirements of our increasingly complex world (AITSL, 2011).

Perhaps the beginning point of bringing about change in PSTE starts by seriously, and over a period of time, providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to challenge their preconceived opinions and attitudes about learning, teaching and themselves. Glasser's (2006) Choice Theory, as presented in the text, "Every Child Can Succeed", affords a new lens through which to examine pre-service and in-service teacher education in western cultures. Indeed Glasser's (1998, 2006) theorising supports the value of reflection through self-monitoring, self-evaluation and self-assessment and the concomitant impact on the building of positive relationships between teachers and their students. According to Glasser (1998), teachers need to be aware that they are not in control of the environment but only in control of themselves, within the environment, which represents a significant change to the way education and teaching is currently perceived.

Dyson (2009) also argues for a focus on self-reflection in PSTE, supporting Korthagen's (2001) identification of reflection as the key to successful teacher preparation due to being situated in personal experience. Personally constructed ideas and concerns, emerging through reflection, provide substance for further debate and discussion with others. One of the essential attributes of a teacher is the disposition of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), which is only achieved through reflection. Accordingly teachers should emerge from teacher education programs with not only knowledge and understanding of the task and role of teaching but also of themselves and how to relate to others, representing learning that has been transformational (Dyson, 2009).

According to Mezirow (1991) all learning is change but not all change is transformation, and furthermore differences exist between transmissional, transactional and transformational education and learning. Cranton (2007) also refers to this in her discussion of Mezirow's (1991) approach to transformative learning, stating. "…we define it as a process by which individuals engage in critical self-reflection that results in a deep shift in perspective toward a more open, permeable, and better justified way of seeing themselves and the world around them" (p. 101). Such a shift in perspective is akin to a shift in consciousness or a mind change, described by Mezirow (1991) as mindfulness - "being aware of content and multiple perspectives. It is what transformation theory calls reflective action" (p. 114). He also suggests "we transform our frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). The idea that the 'self' that is central in transformative learning does not negate the role that others may play, with Cranton (2007) proposing that "…the relationships among members of the group were vitally important to their learning. Much of the learning, and perhaps especially their transformative learning came through their connections with each other" (p .100).

This need for reflection has also been explored by Bauman (2001) in commentating on the post modern world, where he suggests the need for a focus on "tertiary learning" – "learning how to break regularity, how to get free from habits and prevent habitualisation, how to rearrange fragmentary experiences into heretofore unfamiliar patterns while treating all patterns as acceptable solely until further notice" (p. 125).

Method

Since the SSL began operating as the Alpine School in April 2000, a strong partnership has been developed with a team of researchers from the Faculty of Education at Monash Gippsland. During

this time, more than 700 students and 50 teachers have participated in the research. Through utilising a mixed methods framework (Tashakorri & Teddlie, 2009), a large body of both qualitative and quantitative longitudinal data has been gathered through surveys, individual and focus group interviews and observations. Data analysis has been ongoing and has employed both qualitative and quantitative software packages (SPSS and NVivo) to assist in meeting quality requirements of validity and reliability across the two methodological paradigms.

As the process of reflection within the SSL program was explored mainly through the qualitative arm of this research, only this aspect of the methodology will be discussed in this paper. The process of analysing student and teacher interviews was underpinned by constant comparison (Patton, 1990) and inductive analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) to develop and consider emergent themes. Repeated reading and re-reading of the data enabled representative quotes to be drawn from the interviews, forming the first-order analysis and highlighting thematic descriptions relating to the reflective process. In the first instance, descriptive codes assisted in the identification of relevant and interesting behaviours and events, followed by further inferential coding in which conceptual linkages were made and used in the development of new categories. This second order of analysis explored the patterns that emerged relating to the nature and impact of the reflective process as part of the transformative learning journey at the SSL.

In order to establish trustworthiness of data Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend that researchers demonstrate that the work has credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. The extended relationship that has developed with the SSL over more than a decade, resulting from a high level of ongoing engagement and consultation supports that the research has credibility. Dependability has been assisted by regular peer debriefing with colleagues and the establishment of an audit trail with an international colleague who while familiar with this research, is not directly involved. Although limited to one environment, the large scale longitudinal nature of this study lends itself to the notion of the transferability of emerging understandings to the wider educational context. Finally, a process of triangulation was developed utilising non-participant observation, interviews analysis, and field notes thereby providing a reflexive, self-critical account to meet the criterion of conformability as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

Results and Discussion

Data from student and teacher interviews illustrated a strong focus on the value of reflection and building of constructive relationships as specific positives associated with involvement in the SSL, as outlined in the following vignettes.

1. Knowledge of self and the development of personal respect

An important theme emerging in many of the interviews related to growth in self-awareness and the development of mutually respectful relationships at both the student and teacher level.

Interviewer: Will you be able to tell yourself that? Will you be able to tell yourself that you're a better person?

Clem: Yeah, I reckon I've turned out to be a better person, more listening and caring and stuff like that. More respect. Cause respect for yourself and for each other goes with everything that matters in life.

Sean: Everyone's really different here, like no one person is the same. We're all individuals and we all have to respect each other in our beliefs.

One of the ways in which the SSL appears to allow students to experience meaningful participation is through having to resolve conflicts and support each other while living at the school. Living in such a small community requires the students to keep interacting.

Karen: It's hard if you have disagreements up here. It's hard.

Elliot: Because you're always going to see that person.

Karen: Yeah, and you can't really avoid them or anything.

Staff interviews revealed a similar perception about the focus placed on self awareness and respectful interaction.

Kath: Students could still learn the same skills (as in mainstream schools) but maybe not in such depth, i.e. if they have an argument at school in a mainstream school, they get to go home, whereas here, they have to deal with it. At the SSL students will call a meeting and deal with the issue.

Trevor: I see my role as facilitating the students' maturation process, giving students confidence in themselves, helping them express themselves and using this to work with others and in teams, having power over the life in sort of context in the future, providing opportunities for students to practice being themselves in a totally new social context.

Clare: I find our job here is one of guidance through the educational program to teach students how to cope and I think, morally it's my job to be honest, positive, caring, provide guidance, help students understand values like respect, trust, how interesting it is to learn, and then to take learning away, and moral experiences really, you know, how … and through dealing with issues – basically, stuff like that, and really, to impart a 'can do' attitude that they can take anywhere, and I'm trying not to say can do, you can do it, you can do it, but I try to guide them into successful situations, yeah.

2. *The growth and development of relationships*

For many of the students the most significant aspect of the program centred on the relationships they formed with each other and with the staff at the SSL. Toni, a student commented about the students who were at the SSL from her home school;

Toni: Yeah. It's really amazing the friendships that come out. Even back at school, like me and the three boys weren't, all of us weren't really that close except the boys sometimes. And me and the boys have been in the same class for the last three years.

Yet students did not see the development of positive relationships as something that automatically happened but recognised that relationships require work and a personal commitment.

Jack: You also have to be sort of be nice to everyone else and you can't just be rude to all the other people around you or else you're just going to end up in a bit of a hole, put yourself in a bit of a hole. So you have to be like nice to everyone and all the teachers.

Georgia: It's really easy to cause controversy without even trying too. It's really easy to like start a problem without realising it in the community.

Interviewer: Right. So there have been a few issues that have come up?

Jake: Yeah, I think everyone has started something, somewhere along the way.

Georgia: Yeah, because everyone just gets really touchy about things, because when we're living so close that it matters what everyone says to everyone.

Interviewer: And have you found ways to deal with that?

Jake: Don't bring your problems to class

Sam: Build bridges.

Both students and staff commented on the positive relationships developed at the school, which differed substantially from what they had previously experienced. Strong bonds between students and staff seem to encourage and support adolescents learning and engagement, reflecting McCrindle's (2006) argument that adolescents are looking for relating, mentoring and guidance rather than the more traditional styles of teaching as generally experienced within mainstream settings.

Interviewer: How do you find the teachers here?

Sue: I like them so much. They talk to you like a person and not a student.

Margaret: They care about what you think sort of thing, like the other teachers do too, but they're focussed on the class and making money or whatever.

Sue: Just getting the work done, but up here it's like flexible so you can do, and this is what they love to do and they're happy doing it.

Margaret: Yeah, and they want to like know about you. Yeah. Some of these teachers probably know more about me than any of my teachers at [the name of the home school] for like three years. One teacher doesn't even know my name and I've been in his class for three years. But I mean up here I've known some teachers for like seven weeks now and they all know my name.

From the teachers' perspective, it was also focused on relationships:

Kaye: Well I focus on the students more than the curriculum, I focus on relationships and experiential learning and not necessarily bothered if I don't cover the set curriculum. I go in with a rough idea of what I want to cover but if I don't it's not a big deal. If there's an issue that evolves in class I continually try and create points of tension that then need talking through.

Paula: Student self development and social networking with other students and staff, students gain a sense of independence, living in an environment away from home away from a parent structure and gain a valuable insight into how other people work and think and how they can interact with others, as a team member and create positive things for communities and in their own schools.

John: They learn a lot about themselves. They learn how they learn best and what environment suits them, and they learn that everyone's different, and I think a lot of it is the social relationships they build as well.

As the SSL runs a residential program, teachers by necessity take on roles traditionally filled by parents, therefore it is essential that they develop an understanding of the student's basic needs and possible motivators as they attempt to assist students in learning how to take responsibility for their own internally motivated behaviour. When teachers take the role of nurturance to new levels of involvement, as occurs at the SSL, they are indeed engaged in possible life changing events.

Conclusion

As argued by Dyson (2009), there is a place for an emphasis on reflection within PSTE programs to assist pre-service teachers to examine their patterns of habitualisation – including their use, personally and professionally, of the seven deadly habits (Glasser, 1998). He argues that a graduate leaving a program, underpinned by the principles of 'Choice theory' and 'tertiary learning', would be more prepared to view their life, their chosen career, their spheres of influence and their personal contribution to planet earth, and its people, in a transformed way. This would require a conceptual shift in the way we carry out teacher preparation in the western developed world, following the advice of Arendt (1958) to "think what we are doing".

This approach to thinking about education and teacher education has the potential to open up a new landscape – a transforming landscape, which facilitates a new perspective based on reflection and underpinned by connectedness and the building of positive relationships. Therefore, there is a need within teacher education for foregrounding the value of nurturing teacher/student relationships such as demonstrated in the alternate setting of the SSL.

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