Research Note

Myths, Mysteries and Mates:  
The Experiences of Culturally Diverse First Year Early Childhood Student Teachers

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Abstract

An initial finding of a PhD study to explore the experiences of culturally diverse early childhood student teachers was that participants found the first year of study the hardest, with peer friendships being critical to success. Through narrative interviews, recent early childhood teacher education graduates reported that making friends proved to be an important survival strategy, restoring a positive sense of self. Vartuli (2005) highlighted the importance of positive self-perception in student teachers, linking this to ongoing teaching practice. This paper discusses the importance of student friendships in relation to successfully completing the first year of teacher education.

Key Words: Teacher education, self perception, friendships, cultural diversity

Introduction

The language of friendship is not words but meanings.  
Henry David Thoreau

My research explores the experiences of early childhood student teachers who were raised outside New Zealand in a culture that is significantly different to the dominant Western culture of New Zealand. The purpose of the research is to increase understandings of issues and challenges faced by student teachers whose previous educational experience and understandings of early childhood education might differ from New Zealand’s mainstream education system and pedagogy.

Literature Review

Literature concerning teaching student teachers who belong to ethnic minorities appears to be scarce at this stage. However the wealth of cultural diversity that now enriches our educational institutions provides interesting professional discussion, yet does not seem so apparent in practice. Perhaps, as Bates (2005) argues, the political influence on
teacher education providers muffles the voice of teacher educators who speak of new possibilities and broadened socio-political perspectives and worldviews.

The understandings, beliefs and literacies of students teachers discussed by MacKinnon and Manathunga (2003) highlights the dominance of Western contexts as a basis for knowledge in universities. As MacKinnon and Manathunga point out, this can reduce diminish the ability of ethnic minority students from contributing in class discussions, and makes their conditions for learning more challenging; supporting the findings of Meleisia and Schoeffel (1996) who discussed the importance of contextualisation in forming understandings and interpersonal relationships. Vartuli (2005) further highlights the importance of the teacher’s sense of self-worth in relation to forming a professional identity in teaching practice.

A challenge that often confronts culturally diverse student teachers is having confidence in using the English language. Cruickshank, Newell and Cole (2003) highlight the additional requirements of teacher education that are not evident in English language assessment tests. Similar to the claims of MacKinnon and Manathunga (2003), the concepts inherent in language use frequently rely on a culture-specific contextualisation of knowledge and understanding. As stated by Cruickshank, Newell and Cole “the practicum placements require specific knowledge of the cultures of schooling and context-specific ways of interacting with colleagues and students (p.240).

The contextualisation of language and socio-cultural understandings according to Kukari (2004), are implicit in establishing perceptions of learning and teaching prior to undertaking teacher education. As such, Kukari found that student teachers entering teacher education programmes from diverse perceptual positions and world-views are likely to continue to be influenced by their religious and cultural understandings, which will impact on their teaching practice. Kukari suggests that increasing student teachers’ ability to reflect on their knowledge and practice is an important factor in combining a student’s new and previously held knowledge. However as Walkington (2005) suggests, a great deal of the influence on pre-service teachers’ reflective practice is likely to come from associate teachers, acting as mentors during practicum.

In summary, the extent to which student teachers understand course content, teaching practice observed in practicum, combined with the influence of their existing knowledge and prior experience may well be significant in forming their identity as a teacher. This may require openness to world-views and perspectives that differ from the Western dominant culture of most teacher education providers.

The Study

Through narrative interviews (2000) I have gathered the reflections, thoughts and stories of ten recent Diploma or Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) graduates. A semi-structured interview approach was taken to guide conversation and facilitate the participants in telling their story in relation to a particular topic.
I defined ‘recent graduate’ as a teacher who had been awarded their diploma or degree within three years of the interview for this research. Participants were sought through letters and consent forms that were sent to early childhood settings across the Greater Wellington Area. This provided a heterogeneous cross-section of cultural diversity, socio-economic and urban/rural demographics. The graduate teachers represented a number of teacher education providers.

Ethical approval was sought from Deakin University research ethics committee, and Whitireia Community Polytechnic research ethics committee. There were a number of key issues that concerned me relating to the nature of this research.

- My role as researcher where sensitive, personal narrative is involved.
- My position as a lecturer who is in the role of researcher, interviewing recent graduate teachers, even though we were not from the same institution (power relationships).
- My role as a researcher who is a New Zealand European, interviewing student teachers who represent minority ethnic communities.

As a lecturer I was aware of having a more powerful position than the graduate teacher participants. This could not be altered but my consciousness of the position guided my behaviour to reduce the risk of any discomfort for participants. As a researcher I undertook to take all necessary steps to ensure that I retained the participants’ anonymity and to respect confidentiality. I protected the identities of participants at all stages of the research, with pseudonyms being used. Hence, the names and location of training institutions and current places of employment have not been disclosed in this or any other publication.

The ethnicities of participating graduates were Samoan, Nuaian, Chinese, Japanese, Fijian and Thai. Six of the participants were New Zealand residents and the others had come to New Zealand as international students. This meant that some participants had been in New Zealand for several years, whilst others were very recent arrivals when commencing study. Since it was a requirement for participating graduates to have been born outside New Zealand in a significantly different culture to the mainstream Western European culture of New Zealand, all participants had English as a second language.

Results and Findings

The taped narrative interviews were transcribed and analysed for themes. The issues presented here reflect one major finding from the first set of analysis.

The Myth

I came to this research with no preconceived ideas of what I might find. However, I did come with some assumptions about what I thought might be areas of difficulty, and aspects of the programme I thought should be relatively straightforward. I assumed that the first year of a teacher education programme was the easiest, covering basic theory
and skills. My findings have dashed that belief. Although all participants claimed to have enjoyed their programme of study over the three years, and made strong friendships with peers, each person said that they found the first year the hardest and nearly gave up - and even that they actually hated going to class!

The following examples of statements made by participants highlight some of the common themes from the narrative accounts. Similar themes were found within the narratives of all participants. Kim makes it clear that he didn’t want to go to class, and gave a sense of the isolation he felt as he spoke. Helen emphasised not only her own experience, but that of other student teachers who share her culture and language. Later she spoke of how she wanted to give up but felt that she had to continue for her family pride. Furthermore in Tina’s account, she speaks of her sense of inferiority, with little trust of her own knowledge or ideas.

Kim: It was quite scary, eh, quite scary to start a new thing. To be honest, I didn’t want to carry on, because it was quite hard for me to tell what I’m thinking about. I just didn’t want to go to school. I mean, I could speak English at the time but I’m sure that people couldn’t understand what I was saying… it just felt quite scary.

Helen: …at the beginning it was very hard….it was very hard for me…I think it’s very hard for all the Chinese students. And I don’t reckon they deeply understand what it’s about…they just probably think it’s the way of study. So I do think it’s difficult… how to do the study, how to write the assignments and how to do the research. After you go through all the basic things it’s getting much easier.

Tina: I was terrified at first and I hated class…I was afraid to speak…I was just a girl from Samoa and I didn’t think that my ideas would be right…

The narrative accounts of participants in this study concerned me as students, were appearing to perceive themselves negatively, with Tina’s story providing an example of this. Self-perception of student teachers is critical in determining their identity as a teacher (Vartuli, 2005).

**The Mystery**

According to Vartuli, the self-efficacy of student teachers is a significant determinant in establishing teaching strategies, making judgements and in forming relationships with children. This also impacts on the individual’s ability to develop and sustain motivation (Bandura, 1997), and to take responsibility for learning and behaviour.

When considering these stories the sense of students feeling lost, bewildered and lonely becomes evident. Along with this comes concern for the effects on teaching practice. As Vartuli (2005) points out, teachers and students who have a low level of self-belief are likely to avoid challenging situations and take options that appear to be easier and
safer. Yet the participants in this study have all graduated and are currently working in early childhood settings, some in positions of responsibility.

**The Mates**

The survival strategy appeared to be in the making of relationships with fellow students. Although the support of lecturers was mentioned and highly regarded by all participants, it appeared to be the making of friends that actually made the difference between giving up, or continuance and eventual success.

Kim: I guess I made a few friends in my class and, yeah, so I know I used to hate to come to school, but after that I really liked to come to school…It was good to have friends in the class. We help each other…

Vi: One thing I learned is that it really helps to have a friend.

Helen: I know a lot of Chinese students these days and they normally call me and ask me about practicum and assignments and I will explain to them… I do think people from New Zealand have a different opinion from people who come from a different place…and so for the people who come from outside New Zealand, I can understand how hard it is.

For many of the graduate participants, friends within the class who shared their own culture and ethnicity were the most valued. However this was not the case for all as not all participants had a same culture peer in the group. Hence the most important factor was having the friendship of a peer who related to the material, content and issues of the programme faced by the student.

The position of a peer, rather than a lecturer, in relation to common issues seems to be a significant factor for student teachers. Participants discussed the need to identify with others to enable a sense of self within the group. Martin and Van Gunten (2002) highlight the correlation between identity, relationships, and the likelihood of student teacher success, and identify these factors as having significance in the strengthening of a teacher’s professional self. Furthermore, as claimed by Gibbs (2000):

What student teachers know and can do, and how they come to teach during student teaching is largely mediated by what they think and believe. Central to this mediation are student teachers’ self-perceptions, and in particular, their self-efficacy as teachers, their preferred orientations as teachers, and their preferred orientations toward students (p. 7).

The concepts of peer support and interpersonal relationships were important factors considered by Walsh and Elmslie (2005) in their exploration of placing early childhood student teachers in pairs for their first practicum. Although the finding was largely
positive due to the opportunity this practice offered for peer support, discussion and collegiality, some students highlighted the importance of careful selection of pairs, suggesting that the relationship between students was critical to the outcome of the teaching experience. Others suggested that relationships were highly significant to learning, and that pairs should be able to self-select.

Participants in my study suggested that having trusting relationships where student teachers can work as equals, appears to have a significant impact on emotional well-being and motivation. Positive peer friendships also allow students to build confidence in a way that a lecturer could not. Many student teachers whose school experience has been overseas perceive lecturers as the provider of information rather than having any pastoral role. For example Meleisea et al. (1996) reinforce the diverse views of educational practice as they point out “Polynesian children are conditioned from early childhood to learn passively, primarily by careful observation and listening” (p.9).

Similarly, student expectations of respectful behaviour towards teachers were also identified by student teachers from China (Santoro, 1999). As participants made reference to attitudes towards student-teacher relationships from their own schooling being retained as adult students, the friendships formed during the first year by culturally diverse student teachers are likely to be significant in establishing a sense of acceptance and belonging. Although this is possibly true for all students, it is perhaps most significant where the student has experienced a sense of being an outsider to the culture and the system. This is an area that I will continue to explore as this study progresses.

Implications

According to Hawke, Cowley and Hill (2002), relationships with lecturers are of significance to student success, but this study has revealed the important role of friends in student retention and success. This highlights the importance for teacher educators of using teaching methods that encourage interaction, collaboration and communication, and ensuring that classes are structured in ways that facilitate the establishment of student relationships. As a teacher educator, I take the stories of the graduate participants in this study as a signal to be critically aware of my assumptions about student comfort, understandings and support systems. Through the stories of graduates participating in this study it has become clear that the forming of supportive friendships during the first year of study can be a major factor in ongoing success.

Conclusion

The first year of a student early childhood teacher whose culture and past learning experience is not that of the dominant culture of New Zealand can be a challenging and confusing time. It can also be a critical time for students to establish a positive attitude towards self, and to develop their identity as a learner and future teacher.
Through the establishment of peer friendships participants in this study were able to see themselves in a more positive way. This impacted positively on their attitude towards study and gave them the necessary support to successfully negotiate their first year.

References


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Janet Moles is a teacher education lecturer at Whitireia Community Polytechnic in Porirua, and is a PhD candidate at Deakin University, Geelong, Victoria. Her interest in issues relating to cultural diversity in teacher education initially developed as a teacher in a multi-cultural kindergarten and has intensified during her experience as a lecturer in a multi-cultural early childhood teacher education programme.