

0203

Critical Narrative Inquiry: Respecting Australian Indigenous Knowledge in the Regular classroom

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Background

Indigenous peoples from around the world generally recommend that schooling for their children should be based on community concerns including history and culture, emphasise learning from the land and protection of the environment, respect the knowledge and role of Elders and enable language development. Research described in this paper has been designed to pursue this direction through the establishment of narrative as research and narrative as school curriculum based on the central idea of narrative inquiry (Beattie, 2000; Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Hooley & Ryan, 2007; Phillion, He & Connelly, 2005). Using this approach, students are encouraged to see their schooling as a continuing aspect of their life narrative and construct portfolios of work that involve cycles of looking backwards and forwards, looking inwards and outwards and looking above and below. Exemplars of Indigenous knowledge can then be identified and mapped onto the regular school curriculum. The research is currently investigating the development of critical narrative inquiry as a methodology based on the participation of researchers in a range of activities. In this way, learning occurs within a collaborative and cultural context of respect and recognition which does not seek to impose the views of a dominant and alienating white society.

Research Questions

Narrative inquiry as a broad curriculum construct has been adopted by the study as being an appropriate knowledge and learning framework for Indigenous children in primary and secondary schools (Hooley, 2009, 2007). The research seeks to explore the concept of critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2008) as the basis of a new approach called critical narrative inquiry to enable a broader research context of social and political generative themes that influence Indigenous education. Consequently, the work that is reported here has been initiated by the following research questions:

1. How can narrative inquiry support the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing across the curriculum in schools?
2. How can critical narrative inquiry be theorised and adopted by teachers as a means of researching their own classrooms in general and in relation to the incorporation of Australian Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing?

Under this narrative arrangement, students design projects that relate closely to an issue of community interest such as the natural environment or important events that have occurred. Documentary evidence is collected that could include newspaper articles, photographs and personal accounts from family members. In sharing and discussing this material, students become involved in considering their past and how this relates to their present. By scaffolding this discussion, teachers assist students in considering their personal viewpoints, how this might differ from the views of others and what is required to substantiate their ideas. Finally, a new program or cycle of investigation is planned and implemented to gather a new range of evidence to support the development of ideas that have sprung from the initial consideration.

Methods

Taking narrative methodology as a systematic study of experience made public, the research has developed a three dimensional approach to school curriculum for Indigenous children. Students develop a sense of continuity as they reflect on what has gone before and what might happen in the future. They look inwards to themselves to consider their personal thoughts and then outwards to the ideas of others. They look to the sky for the culture and tradition of their community and to the Earth for connections with the landscape. This is a process of clarifying one's identity or Indigeneity (Brown

& Sant, 1999), engaging a personal viewpoint and developing proposals for the change and improvement of learning. From a philosophical and epistemological viewpoint, humans are considered to live storied lives that are told and retold throughout a life narrative. Schools need to ensure that students are able to draw upon their experience from both an empirical and narrative perspective and to move within and across experience and cultures so that a comprehensive network of understandings can be applied to problems and situations.

Frame

A comprehensive theoretical structure is required to locate Indigenous education within the recognised literature and to provide a means for practitioners to connect their practice with the major problems that must be resolved. Ontological issues are concerned with the public good and how significance for the majority can be achieved. Epistemological issues provide philosophical links with how we know and how to engage challenging ideas. Critical issues ensure that generative themes related to the socio-economic basis of oppression are analysed and combated.

Note. The program did not allow me to insert a diagram here. It shows the relationship between ontological (Habermas), epistemological (Dewey, Beattie, Clandinin and Connelly) and critical (Freire, Kincheloe).

This approach to learning through critical narrative inquiry is applicable for all students, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous. In a significant discussion, Attwood (2005, p. 182) raises questions about the nature of oral history regarding European settlement in Australia and how the lack of written documentary evidence can often be used to discredit Indigenous accounts. Attwood suggests that European historians need to have a much better understanding of how Indigenous peoples come to agreement on their own knowledge and history and 'whether new forms of historical narrative are required in order to represent these.' Identical considerations apply in school.

Research findings

Findings to date involve an emerging methodology (critical narrative inquiry as research) and emerging constructs of knowledge generation for Indigenous children in schools (critical narrative inquiry as curriculum). Participation in critical narrative learning should benefit both students and teachers. Beattie (2001, p. 123) comments that 'Through their efforts to create classroom and school communities where students learn to become full participants, these teachers continually develop their own abilities to rescript and enact new narratives of student-teacher relationships, of teacher-teacher relationships and of classroom-school and community relations.' If teaching is seen to be one-way knowledge transfer, then it is difficult to see how new ideas can connect with the current understandings of students and how pathways to learning can be constructed. Rather, a mutual approach to narrative inquiry is required enabling teachers and students to investigate and reflect on their personal narratives and stories so that learning is grounded in a legitimate community of practice. Artefacts, exemplars and portfolios enable learning to be demonstrated and discussed and provide the basis for new narratives, or new learning, to be built.