

Teaching for Diversity: Homework Support Programs as Sites of Possibility in Teacher Education

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Background

The increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in schools in a globalised world is one of the most crucial challenges for educators. Despite the imperative to re-design pre-service and in service teacher education to respond productively to difference, research suggests that pre-service teacher education devotes relatively little attention to the development of pedagogies for teaching within cultural and linguistic diversity (Miller, Kostogritz & Gearon 2009). Beginning teachers frequently have simplistic understandings of students from culturally and linguistically diverse student backgrounds (Santoro 2009), and limited opportunities to work with a variety of cultural groups during their teacher training. The educational inequities between culturally and linguistically diverse students and privileged populations remains a significant issue for those concerned with socially just education. In Australia there has been a proliferation of Homework Support Programs funded by Governments and welfare agencies targeting specific populations, such as Indigenous and refugee students, all of which rely heavily on volunteer tutors. This paper reports on a multi-site ethnographic study of the pedagogical relationships and learning opportunities created when pre-service teacher education includes service learning in the form of fieldwork placements as tutors in Homework Programs.

Research Questions

This study aimed to address two core sets of issues. The first was to investigate the forms of educational disadvantage experienced by refugee students and to document effective interventions in out of school settings over time. The second and the focus of this paper, was to explore the extent to which an extended tutoring placement in a Homework Program increased pre-service teachers' awareness of the challenges facing refugee and ESL students at school and provided an opportunity for the development of appropriate pedagogies for teaching within culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

These research questions were the focus of study:

- What forms of educational disadvantage do refugee students experience?
- What organizational structures, forms of tutor training and tutor interventions constitute best practice in Homework Support programs?
- In what ways can pre-service teachers, acting as volunteer tutors in Homework Support Programs, contribute to the language development and cultural understandings of refugee students?

How does an ongoing tutoring role contribute to pre-service teachers' pedagogical understandings of Languages Other Than English (LOTE) students' learning needs and develop professional identities and repertoires of practice?

Methods

During 2008 and 2009, pre-service teachers enrolled in primary and secondary Graduate Diplomas in Education at La Trobe University in Melbourne, were invited to volunteer as homework tutors in fulfilment of a course requirement that they participate in 60 hours of fieldwork in an educational setting other than a school. A total of 90 pre-service teachers participated in the two-year study, funded by the Faculty of Education at La Trobe University. Students selected placements from 10 community and school-based homework support programs in inner and Northern Melbourne and

attended weekly. They were also required to participate in University based training sessions during their year-long involvement. The ethnographic research techniques involved field observations, audio and video recording of pre-service teachers during their interactions with students as they provided homework assistance. Pre-service teachers also completed surveys, participated in interviews, focus group discussions and created digital stories of their tutoring experiences. Selected interviews and video interactions were transcribed.

Frame

The study draws on the theoretical perspectives of Pierre Bourdieu to investigate the extent to which student - tutor interactions activate and develop certain forms of social, cultural, economic and emotional capital to produce educational advantage. The analysis explores the extent to which the pre-service teachers became aware of the actual and symbolic power of language, manifest through their efforts to scaffold the language and cultural learning of their refugee students. We also foreground the formation of teacher identities through the analysis, following Britzman (1998, 2003) in tracing the emergent tensions between the pre-service teachers' previously unconscious personal beliefs about teaching and learning and their experiences of tutoring culturally diverse students.

Research findings

The paper identifies the significance of participation in tutoring programs for the development of pre-service teachers' understandings about inclusive pedagogies and teaching for diversity. Pre-service teachers reported on their emerging sense of themselves as teachers in terms of: having found their passion or niche, of their growing sense of confidence as teachers, a feeling of being part of a community that included people from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, and an awareness of their naivety in having assumed that their privileged upbringing applied to their students/tutees. We argue that participation in homework tutoring programs offers a rich opportunity for pre-service teachers to critically reflect on "'ethnic self' in relation to 'ethnic other'"(Santoro, 2009). The research demonstrates the potential offered within the tutoring relationship to shape understandings about individualised learning and language development over time, and provide a foundation for an informed pedagogical response to linguistically and culturally diverse student populations.