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Creating spaces to think: collaborative enquiry for improving practice on one-year PGCE programmes

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Background

Background to the research

This paper is an account of a research project that explores the relationship between the enquiry-based learning (EBL) of students learning to become teachers, and the dialogical situations in schools where students learn with mentors. The project arose out of a commitment by two tutors on separate PGCE programmes to collaborate in order to understanding better how students learn. This included a recognition that some students find difficulty engaging critically with educational issues during a one-year PGCE, and explains how the tutors evaluate their own practices. The research has influenced the thinking of both tutors for understanding the nature of effective pedagogies and the systemic nature of educational influence.

Research Questions

Research questions/focus of the enquiry

The research constitutes the reconnaissance phase (Elliott, 1991) of two action research projects about how primary and secondary PGCE students on one-year teacher training programmes learn to become teachers and how their tutors come to understand their needs. The primary programme is currently being restructured in response to student feedback, and an EBL approach to programmes and professional modules has been developed. A main focus is relationships with schools, as approximately half of students' time is spent in primary schools. The secondary programme is being explored to establish why some students experience difficulty in engaging critically with educational issues. This is also influencing the tutors' understandings of what it means to be a teacher. Both projects are therefore concerned with the level of reflection required by tutors and students to improve practice.

Methods

Research methods and/or mapping of the literature:

This study uses an action research methodology, which is generally regarded as a 'process through which theory building and research on practical problems should be combined' (Gray, 2009: 313). It involves planning, acting, observing, reflecting (Lewin, 1946) and re-planning, further implementation, observing and reflecting (Cohen et al, 2000). McNiff and Whitehead (2010) believe that this process enables practitioners to offer descriptions and explanations for their practices in the form of their living educational theories. Consequently, understanding of self becomes a central part in the process. The action research reported here investigates whether students learned to reflect upon their practice through the planned opportunities within the programme and developed capacity to engage critically with educational issues. Moon suggests there are 'identifiable skills and processes that may be part of critical thinking', although acquiring these skills does not necessarily ensure that critical thinking is learnt (Moon, 2008: 21).

In the primary programme a small sample of self-selected primary students was involved in the first research cycle in workshops regarding the development of listening skills and Socratic questioning. Part of this guided discovery is learning to listen for the unexpected, the idiosyncratic and the emotional response (Padesky 1993). Students then entered an assessed teaching placement where

they recorded discussions with mentors during assessed lesson observations and learned to analyse their listening and questioning skills and reflect upon the development of their thinking.

The secondary programme initially involved informal individual and group discussions with students about the difficulties of engaging critically with educational issues within the professional modules. The results of these discussions will inform the next phase of the project.

Frame

Analytical and/or theoretical frame

Learning to become a teacher is complex. Learning how to learn involves thinking, reflecting, questioning, problem-solving, decision-making and evaluating: an open-mindedness to explore the nature of how we think, which includes reflection (Dewey 1997). Reflective thinking is currently recognised as essential for effective teaching, for students and established teachers. Schön (1983) and Pollard (2005) discuss the development of professionals' reflection.

Enquiry-based learning has been used in many professional disciplines in higher education yet is not often implemented within teacher education, possibly because of the 'competence-based' agenda of the Standards that are used to determine whether a person can qualify as a teacher. Consequently, little evidence of EBL approaches exists within teacher education. We redress this situation.

Research findings

Research findings and/or contribution to knowledge

Findings from the primary programme suggest that students are engaging more readily in reflective practice and making collaborative decisions about their learning journeys. This may suggest an increased awareness of personalised learning and the skills required of reflective professionals. The innovative methods employed within the primary programme are beginning to have systemic influence on other programmes and colleagues, who are interested in challenging the epistemologies underpinning their pedagogies. The enquiry-based approach to teaching and learning is being further explored within the secondary programme as a strategy to encourage increased critical engagement with educational issues. The realisation of personal values is evidenced through systematic enquiry of practice and relationships, with both students and tutors. The action research cycle will continue through further cycles to generate deeper questions that analyse practice in a systematic way.