

Research Note

Making Meaning: Working towards Teacher Registration as a Community of Learners

Debbie Ryder

New Zealand College of Early Childhood Education

Abstract

This paper looks at how a group of five early childhood teachers worked on their teacher registration process, from a group perspective and shows how a students' research investigation directly and indirectly influenced the teachers' registration process. The investigation occurred between 2005 and 2006 at one early childhood centre. The teachers met on a monthly basis to discuss their work. They also kept written reflections about their practises. The monthly registration discussion meeting helped to prompt and enrich their personal reflections. The combination of group discussion and personal reflections comprised the collective teacher registration programme.

Key Words: Teacher registration; reflection; professional development; practitioner research

Introduction

In 2002, the New Zealand government announced its ten year strategic plan for early childhood education policy: Pathways to the future/Nga Haurahi Arataki (Ministry of Education, 2002). In this plan, the government announced a three step initiative targeting teacher qualifications and registration in licensed centres. By January 2005, all 'persons responsible' should be fully registered and hold a current practising certificate; by 2007, fifty percent of all 'regulated' teachers employed in any early childhood education service must be registered and hold a current practising certificate; by 2012, at least seventy percent of regulated teachers employed in a licensed service must be registered and hold a current practicing certificate. The remaining thirty percent should be involved in an approved early childhood education teacher education training programme, to be eligible for registration at a later date.

While the number of fully registered teachers is beginning to increase across centres, a far greater number of teachers are seeking registration status. Hence, a dilemma occurs where there are not enough teachers within a centre to act as individual mentors to registering teachers. This paper describes how a group of teachers explored registration as a group or 'community of learners'. Group discussion and individual teacher written reflections acted as the main data source for the research findings.

Literature Review

Goodfellow and Hedges (2007) suggest that action research can be a problematic process for teacher inquiry but that the building in of an 'inquiry process' can help. One aspect of an inquiry process is reflection. Written reflective practice is not a process that comes easily to many teachers, and the act of verbalising personal thoughts to another person can be even more difficult (Cole & Knowles, 2000). Teachers may feel vulnerable when asked to expose their weaknesses to others (Hatton & Smith, 2006).

Rogoff (1998) introduced the notion of inquiry through a 'community of learners'. Rogoff extended on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning by adding a third aspect that is influential to children's learning, that is, the community (or institutional) plane of development. An individual's development (intrapersonal) is understood as an outcome of social interactions (interpersonal) in a given cultural context in which it is enacted (community or institutional). Rogoff's (2003) transformation of participation perspective is viewed as central to the premise of learning within a community of learners.

Methodology

Research Question

The research question that directed the investigation was: How does a group of teachers make meaning of their learning in the process of becoming registered teachers?

Sample

At the time of this investigation the centre had ten staff members. Six of these teachers held a Bachelor of Teaching and Learning degree. One teacher was in training, one was untrained, one was administrative staff, and one a part-time art teacher. The centre had five provisionally registered teachers, all of whom participated in the investigation. The researcher also worked at the centre and was their registration tutor. The process was documented as an investigation for her university study.

Method

The methodology underpinning this investigation was set in the context of a reflexive action research framework. The 'action' was not that of a practical 'problem solving' nature. Instead, this investigation explored changes in the knowledge building processes of the teachers.

The data collected included the researcher's journal entries made at the monthly meetings, the teachers own written reflections, and brief records of the meeting discussions. The journal entries were of a narrative style and recorded immediately after the meeting had occurred. The teachers' were asked to write their reflections after each meeting, and to hand them to their registration tutor/researcher if they wished. The teachers knew that this information was also to be used as research data for this investigation, and therefore only photocopied the information for the registration tutor that they wanted her to see. The meetings were run by one of the five teachers (not the researcher) and she was responsible for writing the minutes of what had been said.

The reflective writing of the teachers became the main source of data. The monthly personal reflections written by the teachers were analysed and categorised before the next monthly meeting. This kept the process manageable, and also acted as an emergent way of feeding

back information to the group for further discussion and reflection. The teachers would then individually reflect/theorise back to the registration tutor/researcher in their next month's written reflections.

What Happened

The five teachers became a community of learners - as they researched their professional practices they gained new and extended insights. The teachers became more critical of their own values, beliefs and assumptions. In this manner, action research alongside reflexive inquiry allowed a framework for the teachers to research their own assumptions and beliefs.

Within this investigation, a group registration process emerged whereby all five teachers could work on their individual practice in a collective forum. In the full thesis (Ryder, date) that this research note refers to, a diagram illustrates the reflexive action framework that emerged during the investigative process. The diagram is a flow chart which was influenced by the following eight steps process:

1. New topic emerges for discussion: Topics for discussion arise from everyday teaching and learning experiences.
2. Group discusses the new topic: The topic is discussed in the group. Contribution to the discussion process is voluntary. Some members of the group may choose not to contribute to the discussion process.
3. Individual teachers reflect on the topic: Some teachers might prefer to use written reflection, rather than discussion, as their preferred communication process. Teachers begin to identify differences in individual teacher practice. Written reflections allow teachers to articulate what they do and do not agree with.
4. Reflections are given to the registration tutor: This one way written reflective process allows individual teachers to articulate their assumptions and beliefs. The registering teacher must ensure that personal information is received in the manner in which it is written. Confidentiality is an important aspect at this point.
5. Registration tutor categorises into themes: Common themes in the individual reflections are identified, categorised and compared. This is an important stage as it allows the registration tutor to gain an understanding of individual and group knowledge.
6. Themes are fed back to the group anonymously: These individual, anonymous themes are made public and shared with the group. It is important for the group that common themes from the individual teacher reflections take on a two-way approach back to the group. Anonymous themes are read out at the end of a meeting, and all teachers have their own copy to take away and reflect further on. In this way, a new form of group knowledge emerges.
7. Teachers 're-reflect' on group topic from the groups' perspective: Teachers then individually 're-reflect' (reflex) on this new group knowledge gained.
8. Group re-discuss the topic from a group perspective: A complex level of discussion and reflection occurs as the group further discusses the emerging themes that are becoming apparent. The registration tutor/facilitator assists the group to explore similarities and differences in practice and underlying issues.

Discoveries

Seven main findings emerged from the investigation. It was found that practitioner action research could play a key role in the communication of a group of teachers within an early

childhood centre. Discussion and written reflection provided the group with alternative forms of communication. Shifts in group dynamics highlighted a move from the need to agree to an acceptance of diversity. Teachers held individual beliefs and practices that contributed to the collective of teaching and learning. Sociocultural theory acted as a basis for analysing individual and group practice. Responsive facilitation played a key role in the identification of multiple forms of practice. A *reflexive action research* framework can support the complexities of individual as well as group inquiry.

Conclusion

Working toward individual teacher registration as a group was found to be a successful solution to the problem of not having sufficient registered teachers at the centre to act as registration tutors for each registering teacher. This investigation suggests that teacher registration need not be an individual one-to-one process but could become part of the establishment of a community of learning within a centre, where individual accountability to the group is related to an individual's learning and understanding. The teachers made meaning of their learning by talking about this and documenting this as reflections to construct their individual understandings. The reflexive action research approach taken in this investigation linked the professional development of the individual teacher with the collective process of the group. The individual is not forgotten in a sociocultural approach to learning where the individuals' views, opinions and expertise are honoured as valued contributions to the cultural context of the learning community.

References

- Cole, A. L., & Knowles, J. G. (2000). *Researching teaching: Exploring teacher development through reflexive inquiry*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Goodfellow, J., & Hedges, H. (2007). Practitioner research centre 'stage': Contexts, contributions, and challenges. In L. Keesing-Styles & H. Hedges (Eds.), *Theorising early childhood practice: Emerging dialogues* (pp 188-210). New South Wales: Pademelon Press.
- Hatton, N., & Smith, D. (2006). *Reflection in teacher education: towards definition and implementation*. Australia: University of Sydney.
- Ministry of Education. (2002). *Pathways to the future: Nga huarahi arataki: A 10 year strategic plan for early childhood education*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.
- Rogoff, B. (1998). Cognition as a collaborative process. In D. Khun & R. Siegler (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology* (5th ed.), Vol. 2 (pp 679-742). New York: John Wiley.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ryder, D. (2007). *Making meaning: A team of early childhood education teachers working towards registration from a group perspective*. Thesis submitted in partial completion of the requirements for Masters of Teaching and Learning Degree, University of Canterbury, New Zealand.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the participants in this research project who allowed me to openly explore their group registration process. Their individual written reflections acted as the main data for this exploration. I would also like to acknowledge my research supervisors for the tireless hours they spent with me as I came to grips with the fundamental principles of research.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debbie Ryder has previously been an early childhood practitioner for a period of 20 years. She completed her Masters of Teaching and Learning Degree in 2007, focusing on teacher registration. Currently she is working as Programme Manager and lecturer at New Zealand College of Early Childhood Education.