Linking Research to the Practice of Education

Contents:

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Editorial

Welcome to this issue of *Linking Research to the Practice of Education*, a UNE School of Education research newsletter for all educators. In this issue you will find three articles outlining research that may have applicability to your setting.

Margaret Sims and Yukiyo Nishida present the perceptions of pre-service early childhood educators who underwent a short-term international experience in Japan. The authors explore the ways in which these educators' experiences impacted on their understandings of quality early childhood service provision.

In the second article, MaryAnne Haines presents an assessment tool that shows promise for primary school teachers investigating whether any of their students might be twice-exceptional. In her mixed methods study, she joins with a group of teachers to develop and trial the Teacher Checklist Questionnaire (TCQ).

In the last article, Rachael Adlington reveals three ways in which readers become co-authors in blogs. She also argues that teaching students how to craft effective blogs requires knowledge of how to position the reader as co-author, and how to achieve the co-authoring that is desired.

We hope that you find something interesting in this issue. The next issue will come out in August, 2018.

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Short-term international experience and students' understanding of quality early childhood service provision
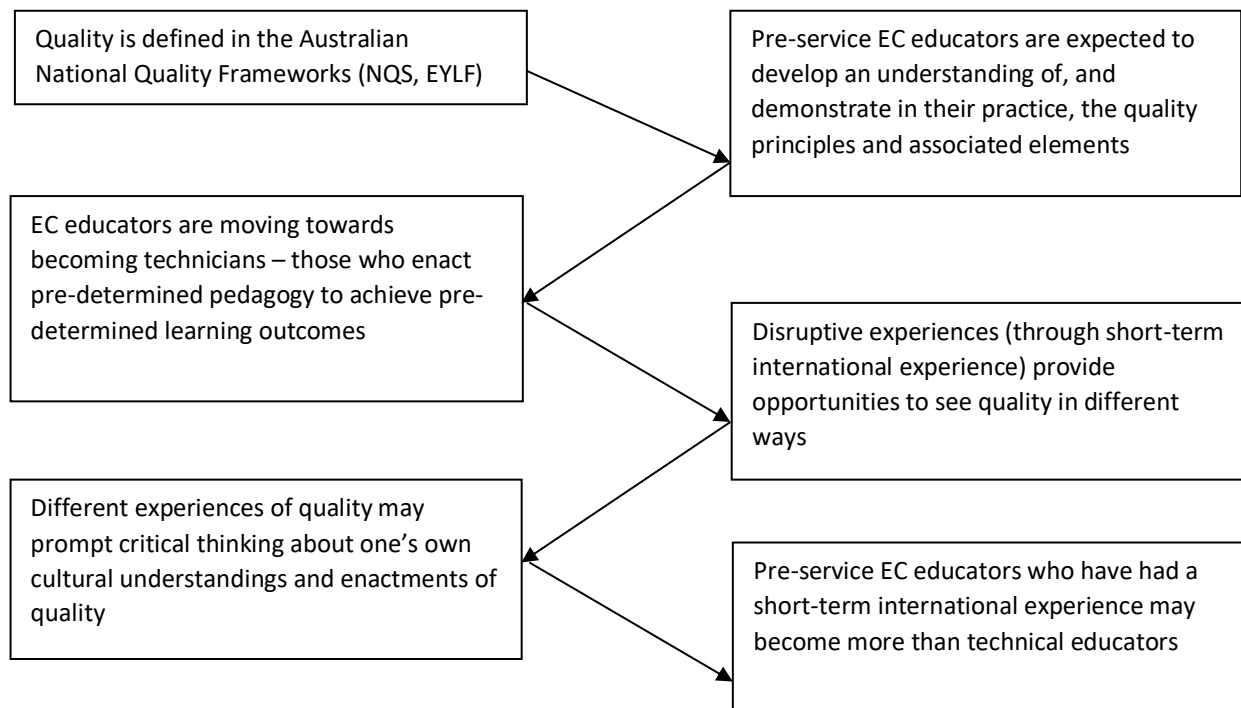
Prof Margaret Sims and Dr Yukiyo Nishida, UNE

Exposing pre-service educators to international professional experiences through a short-term visiting programme serves to challenge their understandings of good quality practice by disturbing the assumptions and expectations that were previously formed through experiences in their own country/culture.

In the increasingly neoliberal Australian early childhood sector, externally imposed standards define quality and this is enacted in relatively homogenous ways in practice. Opportunities to observe practice arising from different understandings serve to challenge thinking, potentially leading to different worldviews.

In this study we present the perceptions of pre-service early childhood educators who underwent a short-term international experience in Japan. In particular, we explore the ways in which their experiences impacted on their understandings of quality early childhood service provision. The assumptions underpinning the conceptual framework that guided the data collection and analysis in this study are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: an overview of the assumptions underpinning the conceptual framework

Quality is defined in the Australian National Quality Frameworks (NQS, EYLF)

Pre-service EC educators are expected to develop an understanding of, and demonstrate in their practice, the quality principles and associated elements

EC educators are moving towards becoming technicians – those who enact pre-determined pedagogy to achieve pre-determined learning outcomes

Disruptive experiences (through short-term international experience) provide opportunities to see quality in different ways

Different experiences of quality may prompt critical thinking about one's own cultural understandings and enactments of quality

Pre-service EC educators who have had a short-term international experience may become more than technical educators

Methodology

Twelve students participated in the Short-Term International Experience (STIE) and 9 agreed to participate. Participants:

- Were all female
- Aged between 20 ~~to~~ and 23 years of age
- 4 had never travelled outside of Australia before
- 7 came from a rural background and the remainder were from regional or metropolitan cities

We used a photo-elicitation approach specifically to support participants' agency and power in the research given the power differentials between the students and the academic researchers.

Stage 1 of the study involved:

1. An initial meeting with students (i.e. preservice educators) to discuss the research, share the aims and brief students in relation to data collection.
2. Clear guidelines about the kinds of photos that would be ethically and culturally appropriate to take, including guidelines in relation to ethical and professional sharing of photos
3. As part of the STIE, students were asked to take as many photos as they liked (within the ethical guidelines)
4. At the end of each visit, for the research, students were required to select ONE photo that best represented the key thing they had learned from that visit
5. They then wrote a brief reflection about the chosen photo addressing the following questions:
   a. What does the photo say to you?
   b. What did you learn?
   c. Your thoughts or feelings about the photo
6. Students uploaded their photo and reflections onto a Moodle site daily – these were visible only to the approved teaching staff and the approved student members of the site

Stage 2: The following March (3 months after the STIE) all 9 students were asked to participate in a focus group: 3 did so. Table 1 provides a summary of the various themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Table 1: Summary of themes and elements of each theme

Main challenge to understandings of quality	Elements	Students' photos and reflections
Quality is about keeping children safe	Risky play Hazards vs risks Safety Risk aversion	Height of equipment Lack of soft fall under high equipment Lack of straps on chairs Supervision by educators Role of peers Self-monitoring
Sustainability I	Use of natural material outdoor play spaces	Wood lack of primary colours and plastic
Organic	Connecting with nature	Animals Plants Food
Sustainability II	Responsibility for nature	Conservation of water
Ecological views of pedagogy	Recycling	Making toys and resources Handmade
The simplicity of minimalist pedagogic design	Minimising resources	Fewer toys available Spaces with no toys/resources Imaginative play

Implications

It appears that the STIE offered a different way to think about children's risk exposure/safety but that for changes to occur in student practice, they will need further support through other learning opportunities and practical experiences. In terms of our conceptual framework, whilst it appears that the disruptive experiences have challenged students, they have not yet accommodated this learning.

A similar conclusion can be drawn in relation to students' experiences related to sustainability. Here, however, some of the students were able to see how some simple strategies could be enacted in Australia within the current policy framework. Simple games (tail tag for example) could be included in students' 'professional tool box' (Piaget's assimilation). The focus on recycling/re-use suggests a significant change in sense-making (accommodation) in terms of the value placed on new/plastic versus re-used/natural and it does appear from their reflections that a number of students have shifted their understanding of what makes a resource a high quality resource through these experiences.

Overall it appears that the disruptive experiences the STIE offered to students did offer opportunities to challenge their sense-making and to begin the process of developing new frameworks that may support discretionary professional decision-making in the future. However it is not evident that these changes are sustainable without ongoing support and exposure to new learning opportunities.

Questions to ponder

- How do we balance safety and risk?
- How do we balance purpose-built toys with recycled toys or toys made from recycled materials?
- Do children need toys to create learning opportunities? How else can we support learning if we don't use toys/ materials?

- Do the National Quality Frameworks (NQS and EYLF) really define good quality? Can good quality look different than these standards suggest?

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A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT TOOL THAT SHOWS PROMISE FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS INVESTIGATING POSSIBLE TWICE-EXCEPTIONALITY

MaryAnne Haines, UNE*

Primary school teachers in city and regional schools, working with students of multiple abilities, would be supported by a comprehensive and useful assessment tool for their preliminary inquiries into whether any of their students might be twice-exceptional. In Phase One of a mixed methods study in a Sydney primary school (conducted with co-researchers Associate Professor Linley Cornish and Dr Michelle Bannister-Tyrrell), a group of teachers, including the principal researcher, developed and trialled a Teacher Checklist Questionnaire (TCQ) with promising results. These results were later compared to the findings of other assessment strategies in Phase Two of the study.

The structure of the assessment tool (the TCQ) and procedures of analysis

The TCQ is a six-point Likert scale instrument with two sections – Section A focuses on 'Indicators of possible significant learning potential', and Section B on 'Indicators of possible learning difficulties'. Section A includes the six domains/categories of natural-ability from Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT 2.0) (Gagné, 2008, 2013). These

domains also feature in Gagné's later Model, the Expanded Model of Talent Development (2013). Section B of the TCQ incorporates three categories of learning difficulties that are generally familiar to teachers, namely Academic difficulties, Socio-emotional difficulties and Other behaviours (See sample in Table 1). All nine categories have multiple items for teacher assessment based on published literature and teacher experience.

Table 1: TCQ Section B - sample of items and teacher rankings taken from Academic difficulties

SECTION B	Not applicable	Not observed	Uncertain	Sometimes	Often	Always
ACADEMIC DIFFICULTIES						
1 Experiences difficulty in articulating thoughts or at times 'getting to the point'					√	
2 Finds abstract verbal information difficult to remember and comprehend				√		

Ten teachers from Years 2 to 6 trialled the TCQ using selected students from their classes. These students had not been formally identified as twice-exceptional, but were selected mainly on school standardised test results and teacher/researcher consultation. The 24 student subjects were in three nominal groups – high ability with no observable learning difficulties, high ability with possible learning difficulties, and students with possible hidden/ uncertain ability/ies. The scores obtained from the teachers' rankings of each student were analysed quantitatively and teachers' recorded responses in the open-ended sections of the TCQ were analysed qualitatively. The purpose of these analyses was to explore the usefulness of the TCQ in terms of its validity and reliability, and its practical application for teachers.

What are some of the key findings?

Comprehensiveness

- The TCQ is comprehensive in terms of the range of research-based and/or anecdotal items. The items were checked by several teachers in a preliminary trial for clarity and to ensure that wording does not invite premature labelling of children's strengths and difficulties. The tool gives teachers scope to explore traits from a multidimensional perspective of both giftedness/high ability and learning difficulties.

Usefulness

- Each individual's result profile and comparisons across the three trialling groups are clearly observable.
- Statistical analysis indicates encouraging signs of strong internal consistency (reliability) in most of the nine categories.
- Individual teacher responses in the open sections of the TCQ provide additional relevant data about each student.
- Teachers' reflections about the TCQ are positive. One respondent suggested that the Questionnaire could be made available towards the end of term or semester when teachers were more familiar with their

students' learning needs, and that more time could be given for its completion.

Implications for educational practice

The TCQ requires further trialling in a wider range of primary schools with larger and more representative samples. Results would be compared as a further review of the tool's validity and reliability and, with sufficient data, a factor analysis may lead to possible streamlining of the categories. The completion of the TCQ takes approximately 15 to 20 minutes and whilst fewer items in several of the larger categories could be more time efficient for teachers, the existing range of items (or slightly reduced) may still be considered preferable for providing a 'bigger picture' of each student's learning profile.

The main benefit of the TCQ is that it is user-friendly and teachers can readily observe any patterns of strengths and learning difficulties. Where there are results warranting further investigation, teachers can, depending on the location and resources of their schools, consult with learning support staff and/or other professional assistance and/or review appropriate educational strategies. The TCQ is a promising preliminary assessment tool for investigating possible twice-exceptionality. It also has an added bonus for teachers, in that it could be used as an initial tool for exploring the diverse learning needs of all students in the classroom.

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Gagné, F. (2013). The DMGT: Changes within, beneath, and beyond. Talent Development & Excellence, 5(1), 5-19.

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Co-authorship in blogs

Dr Rachael Adlington UNE

Curriculum documents, such as the Australian Curriculum: English (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2015), demand students learn to construct online texts, but learning and teaching with these texts requires a deep understanding of their novel affordances. Online text construction is a collaborative exercise in which authors and readers co-author using technological resources such as comments and tags. For instance, Facebook allows individuals to add posts that other users comment on, and Twitter users add tags to enable searching and sorting of tweets by others. Blog authors use tags to label posts and link them together; when a reader clicks a tag on one post, it displays all posts with that tag.

Commenting and tagging impact significantly on the relationship between blog author, reader and content. According to Kress (2004), designing interactions between reader and content, traditionally undertaken by the author, is increasingly the purview of the reader. Paper-based texts compel readers to follow the order created by authors, but websites use hyperlinks, which give readers authorship over their reading pathways. The website's consumer, not its creator, dictates the way in which the text unfolds.

My research reveals three ways in which readers become co-authors in blogs. I use Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) as my theoretical framework, which views language as enacting three types of meaning: interpersonal (meanings used to interact with others); textual (organisational meanings); and, ideational (meanings about the world and our experience).

First, readers add new content to the post in the form of comments, which remain visible to everyone. Combined, posts and comments are the site for interpersonal interactions between co-authors. Second, tags, like website hyperlinks, allow readers to author reading pathways. Blog authors use tags to make visible the blog's textual organisation. For example, a blog might include several posts tagged with the word 'Recipes', as they contain recipes. Other posts are tagged with 'Christmas', indicating they have something to do with Christmas. The tags show the blog is organised according to these two themes (at least). Interestingly, a post might be tagged with both 'Recipes' and 'Christmas', as it fits both organisational themes. The reader, as co-author, chooses which tag to click, and which theme to pursue in the unfolding of the text.

Finally, readers access ideational meanings through tags. Using the example above, imagine a post containing a recipe for Pavlova. This post is tagged with 'Recipes' and 'Christmas'. Both tags communicate the blog's organisation, but the second tag 'Christmas' indicates, perhaps, that the recipe is one that is used at Christmas. Or, it might mean something else! Readers can click the tag and read more about 'Christmas' (and what the tag means), or be content simply with the recipe. Here, readers may choose to bring additional meanings (about 'Christmas') to the reading of the original post.

Implications for teaching

Teaching students how to craft effective blogs requires knowledge of how to position the reader as co-author, and how to achieve the co-authoring that is desired. A blog author wants readers to comment in a particular way, so the author needs to fashion the post to achieve this. For example, the author starts a narrative in a post then directs readers to 'write the end of the story in the comments'. Or, the author shares an opinion with readers, and constructs the post to (hopefully) get the readers to support the author's

position in comments. Further, a blog author needs to 'think like the reader' and use tags to effectively communicate the organisation of the blog, and also use tags to bring additional information to readings. In all instances, the author must be cognisant of the reader as co-author.

The Australian Curriculum: English in some ways accommodates co-authorship of online texts such as blogs. Some learning outcomes apply to blogs, such as understanding that cohesive devices, like tags, facilitate '… prediction of how the text will unfold' and creating texts that 'entertain, inform and persuade audiences' and (ACARA, 2015). However, such outcomes are placed under considerable pressure when the reader can make significant decisions about how the text unfolds, and when the persuaded audience can talk back. In short, while notions of text co-authorship are absent, teachers can draw upon current curriculum documents as a starting point in supporting students to learn about and craft texts like blogs. However, teachers need to move above-and-beyond curricula to address co-authorship, and curricula must evolve to tackle the co-authorship affordances and demands of online texts.

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