

Positioning Prospective Teachers' Awareness of Diversity: A Critical Literacy Context

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ABSTRACT: This presentation discusses the third and final component of a multi-dimensional study using a distinct learner-centred Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model that invites prospective teachers to collaborate in small groups on inquiry-driven projects that deepen their appreciation of critical literacy. The literature attests to the success of PBL environments where student participation in peer-to-peer discussions furthers more sophisticated capacities to actively process new information. The PBL model is a core component of a mandatory third-year undergraduate concurrent Education course of study for all students enrolled in the Intermediate/Senior program (qualifications to teach grades 7 to 12). Each peer-group, consisting of four to five students, scripts and records a video presentation that accounts for the implications of a case-based dilemma. The PBL model is meant to promote prospective teachers' proficiency to meaningfully translate their understanding of the inquiry-problem as it applies to a broad range of topics and competencies. Consistent with the first two components of the larger study, the PBL instructional approach aims to scaffold prospective teachers' awareness of certain concepts in the broader context of critical literacy. Consequently, the critical literacy framework represents the theoretical basis that positions prospective teachers to be increasingly aware of the implications of ethnic, religious, and socio-economic diversity on case-based teachers and students.

KEYWORDS: critical literacy, prospective teacher development

Introduction

The research under discussion includes an objective to foster prospective teachers' understanding of critical literacy by inviting them to consider and reflect upon issues of equity and power as they relate to teaching and learning (Garrett & Segall 2013; May 2015). It acknowledges the importance of facilitating learning opportunities for prospective teachers to account for the multiple discourses and visions of various education stakeholders and the perspectives they represent in the context of equity and power issues (Florio-Ruane 2012; McElhone, Hebard, Scott, & Juel 2009; Toll, Nierstheimer, Lenski, & Kollof 2004).

Through a unique Problem-Based Learning (PBL), the prospective teacher students enrolled in a third-year concurrent Education program individually and collectively "unpack relationships of oppression to explore how people's belief systems reproduce dominant assumptions and structural inequalities" in schools and school communities (Nicolson, Last, & Widell 2012, 75; see also, Peters & Biesta 2009). The case-studies used in this research are intended to bridge the gap between the theory learned in prospective teachers' education coursework and the actual practice of teaching. The process of study is also intended to engage prospective teachers in a systematic process of inquiry to further their professional development and identity (Harrison 2007; Mead 2019). The constructivist approach employed in the hybrid PBL model under discussion invites prospective teachers to incorporate their prior learning, perceptions, and experiences as public-school students into the thoughtful discussions and reflections of the implications of the dilemma-based case studies (Chicoine 2004; Harfitt & Chan 2017). As Shulman (1992) and others have argued, case studies are particularly conducive to education courses of study since they can embody the complexity of teachers' decision-making and judgement. Moreover, the inductive approach to examining the respective case-based dilemmas serve to underscore the significance of reflection to professional practice (Schon 1987). The model used in this research project reflects a

pedagogical approach that is meant for prospective teachers to better understand interdisciplinary knowledge (Armour 2014; Stolz & Pill 2016).

The participants of this research project are enrolled in the third of a six-year course of a teacher education program in a mid-sized university in Canada. The PBL model is a hybrid version that accounts for some of the strategies that were traditionally used in medical and legal education programs (Cherubini 2020). As stated in a previous publication related to this research study, the model's inquiry process contributes to its uniqueness (Cherubini 2021). The prospective teachers enrolled in the Intermediate/Senior teaching qualification program (qualifying them to teach from grades seven to twelve) engage in a series of case-studies that require them to identify the specific needs of the case-based learning predicament, list and justify to their small group cohort the key objective of each inquiry, and research multiple perspectives and insights (including peer-reviewed journals) to further their understanding of the respective complexities in each case study. The PBL model positions prospective teachers as active learners, critical thinkers, and reflective practitioners (Cherubini 2019).

Context: A Hybrid Problem-Based Learning Model

As discussed in Cherubini (2021b), the hybrid PBL model invites prospective teachers to be active agents in the process of their learning and reflection of the case-based dilemmas, education theory, and their own experiences and beliefs about teaching and learning. Prospective teachers are presented with the model during the course introduction. It is explained that the systematic process of inquiry is meant to enable their critical thinking (Vijaya Kumari, 2014) of the implications, themes, and key developments in each case study.

As components of the process, prospective teachers first read the case, then proceed to discuss its content and significance in a small group cohort. The necessary time is afforded during class for each cohort to discuss their initial impressions of the case content. In advance of class the following week, the prospective teacher participants are required to consult education stakeholders for their perspectives on the case circumstances. An intriguing appeal to the study of cases in an inquiry seminar model such as the one being presented is the opportunities it affords to cross-examine all aspects of teaching, learning, research and practice. The intent is for prospective teachers to realize that ethical issues can often complement and implicate their perspectives on schools as institutions, teaching as practice, and learning as behaviour. To interrogate the cases thoughtfully implies a fundamental concentration on the part of the prospective teacher participants to consider their basic assumptions about teaching, learning, curriculum, and schooling. The knowledge gained through the various interactions as the inquiry unfolds will engage prospective teachers to be deliberate thinkers.

Prospective teachers are, in this way, challenged to imagine possibilities – possibilities that may not necessarily have been part of their experiences and consciousness prior to their enrollment in teacher education. As prospective teachers read the cases and participate in the inquiry-seminar model, they are encouraged to broaden the respective analyses further. The prospective teacher participants are encouraged to enter thoughtfully into the purposeful disruption of what they thought they knew.

This is not to suggest that the inquiry model is meant to undermine the social, cultural, and professional traditions established for teachers and schools; instead, it is to endorse a view of learning that refuses to hinder sincere, thoughtful, and critical engagement. It is a paradigm of learning that values a range of responses to circumstances. It is, in fact, a value-based systemic approach to considering viable questions. From a pedagogical perspective, the hybrid PBL model is conceptualized to foster prospective teachers' thinking, reflection and inquiry skills about organizational, social, political, ethical, and cultural considerations. The anticipated learning rests first in the exploration of the professional dilemmas and then in

the ensuing thoughtful (and ideally provocative) dialogue amongst peers, in the informed voices of educators, the respective literature, and other professionals (Cherubini 2017).

Theoretical Context

Each prospective teacher cohort is expected to share a video production of a case analysis. In doing so, they account for the range of diverse ethnic, religious, and socio-economic diversity that exists in the respective cases. According to the literature, some teachers are not prepared to address the challenges of cultural diversity (Guo 2011; Palmer 1998; Turner 2007). Instead of perceiving “difference and diversity as an opportunity to enhance learning by using the diverse strengths, experiences, knowledge, perspectives of students and parents from various cultural groups, the ‘difference as deficit’ model sees diversity ignored, minimized, or as an obstacle to the learning process” (Guo 2011, 5; Cummins 2003; Dei 1996). The inquiry process, thus, is meant to position prospective teachers to analyze how the case-based circumstances and relations implicate a challenging and complex series of cultural values, spiritual beliefs, traditions, and worldviews (Sensoy & DiAngelo 2017).

Educational Significance: Critical Literacy

The analysis of a wide range of diversity that exists in the cases enabled prospective teachers to appreciate literacy as it includes “social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture” (OME Language Document 2006, 3). As some examples, it drew their attention to the importance of implementing a curriculum that reflects the diverse backgrounds of their students in order to honour their unique perspectives. By examining and reflecting upon the actions of case-based teachers, the prospective teacher participants became more mindful of ensuring that student diversity is appropriately and meaningfully represented in their classrooms.

Given that the inquiry process allows for external consultation, prospective teachers cited the significance of various provincial ministry documents, including *Many Roots, Many Voices* (2005) and *Ontario’s Equity Education Strategy* (2009), to discuss discriminatory bias and obstacles to student achievement in public school classrooms. Prospective teachers examined how students’ identities include race, faith, and socio-economic status. The inquiry process allowed for extensive conversations related to teachers’ professional obligation to create learning environments that are responsive to student diversity. In many respects, prospective teachers became more self-aware of their responsibilities to cater to student diversity. The process, interestingly enough, often contributed to prospective teachers’ heightened awareness of how students’ social and cultural identities impacts on their sense of belonging. In addition, prospective teachers reflected critically upon their own assumptions and biases across varying contexts related to diversity. They underscored, based on the case analyses, the significance of teachers creating safe spaces for open and candid conversations with students. They determined the importance of accurately representing racially driven historical events where teachers serve to facilitate student learning. Ultimately, prospective teachers prioritized student engagement and learning in terms of assisting students, too, to think critically about issues of diversity.

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