

Using real-worldness and cultural difference to enhance student learning in a Foundation Phase Life Skills module

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Our aim was to explore how real-world experience, inclusive of engagement with cultural differences, influences the quality of students' learning in a Life Skills module in pre-service Foundation Phase teacher education. The study was conducted with 147 students in their final year of the Bachelor of Education (Foundation Phase specialisation), at the University of the Free State. A case study design was employed to collect qualitative data by means of focus group discussions, open-ended questionnaires, and face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study suggest that the use of the real world, as a context for authentic learning, enables meaning making, where students gain first-hand experience that allows them to engage with the complexities of preparing to teach in the Foundation Phase.

Keywords: difference; Foundation Phase; learning; life skills; meaning; real-worldness

Introduction

Early childhood is the time of greatest risk and greatest opportunity. Studies conducted in Gautemala, South Africa, the Phillipines, Jamaica, and Brazil emphasise the importance of early cognitive and social-emotional stimulation for later educational progress (Grantham-McGregor, Cheung, Cueoto, Glewwe, Richter & Strupp, 2007; Becker, 2011). Ige (2011) adds that the quality of the education during this crucial age will play an important role in learners' physical and cognitive development in the future. It can be argued that Foundation Phase teachers play an important role in supporting young learners to reach their developmental potential.

In the context of transformation in education in South Africa, Foundation Phase teacher education is undergoing rapid change. In the recent past, this phase has become more regulated through education reforms and mandates leading to universities seeking new ways to prepare graduates for the realities of teaching in the South African context. Faculties of Education face the dual challenge of equipping students with general and specialised pedagogical content knowledge while, at the same time, providing them with teaching practices that foster learning with understanding. In guiding young learners' learning, Foundation Phase teachers need not only impart pedagogic knowledge but also work with learners from diverse cultural backgrounds. Studies reveal that real-world experiences will allow students to activate prior knowledge of the curriculum as well as to see how this knowledge applies to the real world (Andrew, 2011). Kiggundu and Nayimuli (2009) highlight the value of exposure of

student teachers to an actual teaching and learning environment, in which they can contextualise their theoretical knowledge gained during training. Students need to spend time in real-life contexts that offer opportunities to develop and assess practical skills, and expose them to issues that require critical reflection (Hemson, 2007).

The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (Department of Basic Education, 2011) for Life Skills Education in the Foundation Phase is making new demands on teacher education in the field. Life Skills Education for the Foundation Phase is aimed at guiding and preparing learners for life and its possibilities, including equipping learners for meaningful and successful living in a rapidly changing and transforming society. In meeting this aim, students taking the Life Skills module would be required to apply their theoretical knowledge in practice, in order to develop their competence to teach Life Skills effectively.

Hakel (2010:235) believes that, instead of asking students “What do you know?” we should ask them “What can you do with your learning?” This is the reason why a Life Skills module in the Foundation Phase is expected to provide students with authentic early childhood learning experiences with the aim to develop both knowledge and skills which are transferable to real-life situations. This article reports on a study that explored how real-world experience, set as an assessment task in a Life Skills module, influenced student learning.

Conceptual framework

The concepts informing the study are real-worldness and difference. Both these concepts are supportive of the need to pay attention to context as a crucial factor in knowledge construction. They are relevant to the Life Skills module in the Foundation Phase, in particular to the structure of the learning experiences and the performance in an authentic context. It is during the Foundation Phase years that young learners develop the skills that will help them be successful in school and in life. *Real-worldness* can create opportunities for future professionals to understand the characteristics of working with differences in early childhood.

Real-worldness and differences

Early childhood programmes influence the way graduates impact the nature and quality of young learners’ interactions and experiences in the classroom (Ackerman, 2005). Studying to become a Foundation Phase teacher involves a variety of experiences – all of which cannot be assessed through written examinations. Hagstrom (2006:33) articulates this notion by arguing that “book-smart” and “sense-smart” skills should be blended, if teacher educators want to prepare students for the world of work.

Traditional early childhood professional programmes most often regard developmental theory as the grounding philosophy for early childhood education (Cannella & Grieshaber, 2001). During the past few years learning, however, has moved from being overwhelmingly intellectual, towards accepting the importance of social interactional processes and activities (Martin, 2009). Ashton (2010) suggests that renewed interests

in Dewey's concerns with experience and democracy, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, Freire's emancipator/liberationist perspective, Kolb's experiential learning mode, and Lave and Wenger's situated learning theory, may be portrayed as recognition and acceptance of the importance of the *real-worldness* dimension of learning.

While the use of the term *real-worldness* can be open to interpretation, in this article it is understood to mean learning in an authentic environment with real-life conditions and people in all their unpredictability, ambiguity, and complexity (Andrew, 2011). Ndani and Kimani (2010) point out how the immediate social and physical environment in Kenya influenced young learners' development by reporting specifically on the way the environment can motivate or demotivate the teacher. Becker (2011) concurs by explaining how social backgrounds can lead to educational inequalities. It can be argued that *real-worldness* will not only create opportunities for future Foundation Phase teachers to practise what they have learned, but it will also confront students with the realities of different early childhood contexts.

The traditional separation between curriculum and pedagogy can often be false and teaching and learning practices should encourage knowledge construction (Keith, 2010). Wrenn and Wrenn (2009:258) add that, too often, there are complaints about students being unable to make the transition from theory to practice with confidence and effectiveness; it is therefore "imperative that students in professional programmes are able to put into practice what they have learned in the classroom".

Cultural practices have a direct or indirect influence on early childhood education. Anastasia and Teklemariam (2011) report how people's way of life, including customary practices and economic sources can affect the education of girls by referring to studies conducted in Zambia, Tanzania, Malawi, and Kenya. South Africa has a history of multi-cultural intolerance and Foundation Phase students are confronted with the challenge of teaching in multi-cultural classrooms. Multi-cultural education can be understood as a field of research that studies the intersecting factors of race, gender, class, sexuality, culture, ethnicity, ability, and language, proceeding from a strong commitment to equity and social justice (Keith, 2010). Keith (2010) suggests that the concept *difference* be used instead of common terms such as *diversity* or *multicultural education*, as *difference* has a more immediate connection to equity and social justice. Based on Keith's (2010) understanding this study will refer to the term *difference*.

Malik (2002) argues that, although there is nothing good in itself about diversity, *difference* allows us to compare and contrast different lifestyles, values and beliefs and evaluate them in order to decide which is better or worse. Understanding *difference* is critical for Foundation Phase students, because their individual cultural orientations are present in every social interaction. Assumptions are often made about other people's behaviour based on a single cultural indicator. *Real-worldness* can provide the opportunity to create openness to experience and consider multi-cultural issues from other points of view. These include aspects such as backgrounds, language, communication, social values, and beliefs. Understanding that people are not all the same is

important to enable students to embrace and value the things that distinguish each person, or group, from another.

Knowing how to work with a diverse group of Foundation Phase learners is an essential life skill. According to Tolentino (2009), children notice difference, and taking the time, to teach what is important to each culture, can foster acceptance and understanding. Education about cultural differences, therefore, begins with the teacher.

Malik (1998:1-5), however, warns that the “celebration of difference is an intellectual outlook that has been forged out for the seeming impossibility of transforming social relations”. He explains that we need to challenge the blind pursuit of difference, otherwise our capacity for meaningful social change will continue to become diminished.

It seems that *real-worldness* can be a key component in the efforts to prepare future teachers to address the educational needs of culturally diverse classrooms. It has the potential to promote Foundation Phase students’ understanding of social difference and inequality in early childhood classrooms. It can also become a critical space in which to prepare students for their future roles as Foundation Phase teachers.

Method

A qualitative case study design, employing face-to-face semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions, open-ended questionnaires, and reflective journals, was used to explore how real-world experience in a Life Skills module can influence students’ learning. The Life Skills assignment set to the students, and used in the study, introduced the students to one of the focus areas of Life Skills and required them to visit any group of learners from a disadvantaged background. Today’s teachers need to support a sensitive learning community where learners’ academic, socio-economic and cultural needs are accommodated. Providing students the opportunity to interact with learners from a disadvantaged background may equip them with knowledge to accommodate diversity.

The case study research design was deemed suitable as it allowed the exploration of students’ learning of Life Skills in authentic contexts as a bounded case. The purpose of this study was not to generalise, but to gain insight into and understand how students experienced learning in a Life Skills module, where they were afforded the opportunity to use the real-life context as their teacher.

The study was conducted in the Faculty of Education at the University of the Free State (UFS) with two consecutive groups, namely, fourth-year Foundation Phase students registered for the compulsory Life Skills modules in 2010 and 2011. Gathering data from two groups enabled the researchers to gain insight, compare and investigate the way students experienced learning in authentic contexts. The groups comprised 78 female students of whom 69 were Afrikaans-speaking and nine English-speaking (2010), and 84 students of whom 76 were Afrikaans-speaking, and eight were English-speaking (2011). Most of these students would continue with the Life Skills

Education module in the second semester.

After a pilot study, the interview schedules were adapted. The questions focused on students' experiences in real-life world. Students were invited to participate in the focus group discussion. Eight focus group discussions, with five to ten members in a group, were conducted. Purposive sampling was used to invite students to participate in the semi-structured interviews. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Content analysis was applied to narrow the gap between the research concern and the raw data: the data were subdivided by means of assigning categories, as outlined by Fraenkel and Wallen (2008). The category, learning through interaction, yielded two subcategories, namely, broadening personal meaning making and engaging with difference. The data in this study show examples from the common themes that emerged from the study.

Lincoln and Guba's model (1985) for verifying data, as discussed in Mertens (2010), was used to ensure that the findings were trustworthy. Credibility was enhanced by means of triangulation and peer examination. Dependability was ensured by means of an audit trail of the data-gathering process using multiple sources of data methods and data collection. Conformability was similarly enhanced through a degree of neutrality, in that the findings were shaped by the participants' perspectives and not through a research bias. Transferability was enhanced by means of a dense description of the data and, further, by maximising the range of information that could be obtained from and about the assessment context, through purposefully selecting participants (Mertens, 2010).

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by the Faculty of Education at the UFS. Attention was paid to anonymity, informed consent, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, privacy, and conducting interviews in a relationship of trust and transparency.

Results and discussion

The main category that emerged through the data highlighted the value of learning through interaction. The two subcategories – broadening personal meaning making and engaging with difference – anchored and interacted with the main category.

Broadening personal meaning making

Biggs and Tang (2007:2) point out that “cramming students into large lecture halls is no longer good enough”. This structural space for learning has limited value and needs to be complemented by students' engagement with the realities of their profession. This is consistent with the demand for students to develop their own meaning through active engagement in the construction of knowledge (Meyers & Nulty, 2009; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

'Surprised', 'scared' or 'sad' are some of the words that student educators used to describe their feelings when they entered the childhood classrooms. Many students admitted that they had never been in Sesotho classrooms before. Hewitt (2008:89)

describes the advantage of engagement in authentic contexts as the integration of “academic inquiry with actual experience”. This notion has prompted the idea of practical and realistic experiences. The example below illustrates how the real-life circumstances served as a teacher – providing knowledge and opportunities for skills development.

“I personally think that each year ... it must be a compulsory assignment for every BEd Foundation Phase student. It prepared me for the truth out there and allowed me to work in real life circumstances. These are skills that need to be learned as soon as possible in order to be a successful teacher.” [Participant 1B OEQ]¹

The experience in a diversity of contextual and social-cultural classrooms made particular demands on the students. It allowed them to use the situations they found themselves in, in order to guide their actions. It also forced them to confront and engage with the realities they were confronted with:

“This was a real experience for me, it opened my eyes to things I didn’t know exist. To see the joy in the children’s eyes and to give more of ourselves and that we took things for granted. Thanks for a wonderful opportunity.” [Participant 17 OEQ]

The unpredictability and the novelty of the context allowed for new learning to take place. The actual experiences allow students to draw together knowledge and skills while engaging productively and solving real-life problems as well as showing the level of their competence (Biggs & Tang, 2007). The examples below illustrate that some students experienced a level of discomfort and they were challenged to think on their feet:

“I think it learn [sic] you to think on your feet. Because in the classroom situation one day you have to think on your feet” [Participant 1:12a FGD]

“You cannot say, sorry I do not have it [answer] know or the answer is somewhere in a text book” [Participant 1:12b FGD]

“... and you remember it better and you learn more from it” [Participant 1:12c FGD]

“and then you learn from something [situation] that you thought will never happen” [Participant 1:12dFGD]

Not only were they challenged to apply theoretical knowledge but they needed to make meaning of the new experience. Race (2007) argues that meaning making provides opportunities for students to develop insights into themselves as learners, and to discover their strengths and self-efficacy. This challenge that the students experienced also offered them the opportunity to take ownership of their meaning making and be bold in articulating it. It was also clear that students were thinking beyond just giving their teacher educators the right answers. The context they engaged with allowed them to build their own understanding, and to perceive it as authentic. The following excerpt captures this idea:

“If you grasp the concept then you will be able to give your own meaning on it.

So, I think that this Life Skills section module has taught me a lot about giving your own meaning. Because sometimes I have my own meaning, but I am not always sure it's right. So, I am very afraid to write what I think is right. So, this module taught me that you need to sometimes just do that" [Participant 2:6 SSI]

Teachers who are able to translate the curriculum into practice are imperative in early childhood education (Ige, 2011). Students in the study noted how the information they received during the real-life experiences, and the literature they engaged with, had broader application than merely the discipline of early childhood education. It seems that student educators experienced a transformation in their ideas regarding early childhood education, and were able to draw and integrate the knowledge gained for their own concerns. The following excerpt illustrates this:

"... and it is really important to know this information in the module, not only for education, but also in my own life where it made a difference. Research projects like this, allow you to read about aspects that you can integrate into your own life and it also helps you to manage challenges, for example conflict or stress, etc." [Participant 28 OEQ]

The study also found that the students used the opportunity to work in groups to complete their assignment as a tool to engage with ideas from the real world. They were able to share their ideas about the interventions they had undertaken. They spoke about how the group work created a platform for peer learning and broadening their horizon of knowledge. This is illustrated in the following example:

"You learn from one another and you also see things from more viewpoints. So, then you actually ... it's not like when learn in a book where you learn one fact. You see different people's viewpoints ... you get a bigger broader perspective of what you are learning" [Participant 8:6 SSI]

This comment shows that real-worldness allowed students to gain knowledge about the larger community. Being a professional Foundation Phase teacher involves more than the mastery of knowledge. It also involves the ability to form meaningful relationships with learners from diverse cultures in a classroom. Hurd (2006:4) points out that when students move outside of themselves and encounter others in the community, they come to a greater appreciation of the assets contained in the diverse groups that comprise their community, state, and nation. In this way, authentic learning has an important role to play in helping students to negotiate differences.

Engaging with difference

Research findings show that student and beginning teachers find teaching in a multicultural classroom a challenge because they are confronted with different ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds (Van Tartwijk, Den Brok, Veldman & Wubbels, 2009). Soudien (2004) argues that the historical background of South Africa necessitates a focus on the concept of difference. As a category for analysis, it allows one to focus on processes, categories, discourse, and context. The engagement with difference is

important considering that, although universities aim to promote understanding of difference, the very structures and programmatic experiences negate positive outcomes when dealing with this issue.

In the context of the institution where this study was carried out, engagement with difference is imperative. In 2008, four students from the Reitz hostel humiliated five black workers in a mock initiation video (Smith, 2010). This Reitz incident highlighted how race as a category of difference was used to discriminate and sow seeds of division at the university (Higher education transformation, 2009). While the agendas for transformation since 1994 have been in place, they did not have a fundamental impact on the change in student behaviour towards those from other groups.

For teacher education the engagement with difference is clearly articulated in the minimum requirements for teacher education (Republic of South Africa, 2011). Students need to learn about the complex and differentiated nature of South African society and learn to work with the diverse challenges faced by children in schools and the communities they serve.

In the study students had to complete their tasks in out-of-the-ordinary contexts. They were exposed to environments with which they were unfamiliar. The real-life context allowed students to position young children as knowledgeable people from whom they could learn. This takes place when adults/teachers are able to shift their view of children as adults-in-making, to children as social actors with agency (Ebrahim, 2010). The excerpt below illustrates how the real-world experiences led to learning about two categories of difference, namely, generational (adult-child) and language.

“It was a wonderful experience for me. It was a huge privilege to make a difference in the ... orphanage. I learned a lot from the children. Most of them could not speak English or Afrikaans. I even learned some Sesotho words from them”
[Participant 40 OEQ]

The above comment shows a broadening of perspectives. It highlights that working in authentic classrooms created opportunities for education students to re-think their existing beliefs of other cultures. Gay (2006) explains that teachers with broad perspectives relate better to learners, and are better at creating classroom conditions conducive to learning. Chang, Anagnostopoulos and Omae (2011) concur by stating that real-life contexts can serve as a catalyst to students' understanding of social difference.

Students in the study acknowledged that they would have never ventured into the contexts in which they were required to conduct their assignments. This can be attributed to the historical zoning of residential areas. In the authors' experience it is not uncommon for white students to be completely oblivious of events in a neighbouring black township. It was evident that the students in the study had to engage with the contrasts between their environments and the ones they entered. For example, a student noted: "... it was wonderful to work with children from other cultures and communities ...". The following example illustrates an experience in a new environment.

“Yes, but it is something that you ... it is an environment which you enter and that you are not used to or that you usually will not go to. You do not have knowledge about it. ... And then they taught us so much, ... because just to see it, ... was so enriching” [Participant B3:5 FGD]

Jansen (2009:22) argues that one way to overcome barriers to change is indeed to focus on the “common humanity” of people. The students in the study were able to connect with the idea of a common humanity which is usually based on universal human values. In this context it became irrelevant to engage with difference. The following comment reinforced the idea that focusing on the “common humanity” (Jansen 2009:22) of learners implies seeing each learner as a unique, special child:

“I learned that every child is special, it does not matter ... it will still be a child. It will always be a child ... a child who has little heart” [Participant B2:14 FGD].

Similarly, another student observed:

“Every child is unique and if you concentrate less on his background ... because we learned in one subject about a child’s behaviour ... but if we concentrate less on his behaviour, but rather accept that each child in your class should be handled in a unique way. All the children are not the same and cannot be judged over by the same yardstick. I think if we go and teach next year, it does not matter where you teach. Your classroom should be a safe place for that child. You must show them that you love him [her] and that he [she] is special. Every child must feel that is his [her] safe place [Participant B3:13 FGD].

It can be argued that excerpts show the potential of students to alter their thinking about their roles as teachers in the South African society. The above comment leads us to conclude that in coming to the above realisation, students were brought face-to-face with stereotypes and assumptions about the learners and the community.

In order for students to fully embrace difference they would have to acknowledge that difference exists and that the young children are aware of it. Ebrahim and Francis (2008) presented stark images of how children engage with difference. Real-life learning is an important medium through which students can develop knowledge and understanding of difference. Students in the study tended to homogenise difference. This occurred because of the students’ preparation in child development courses grounded in traditional understanding from developmental psychology (Ebrahim & Francis, 2008). While the image of the universal child is strengthened, the understanding of difference is not. The following example illustrates this:

“It was a headache for me when I learned that I must also make time for this assignment, but when it came, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed seeing how the learners appreciated the attention. I realised again why I want to become a teacher. Race, gender or economic circumstances did not matter. I cannot wait to go and teach. I think it is important that all students should have this experience. It can also be longer, I think. I enjoyed it very much” [Participant 14 OEQ].

Diversity and difference are often seen as difficult topics due to their sensitive nature.

Niemann (2006) explains that diversity must not be seen as a dividing factor but as a challenge where attitudes towards differences can be changed. By confronting the sensitive issues in a natural context, students were assisted to develop a deeper understanding of difference and to gain practical knowledge of how to deal with real-life problems.

Discussion and concluding remarks

In this article we sought to explore how real-world experience, inclusive of engagement with cultural differences, influences the quality of students' learning in a Life Skills module in pre-service Foundation Phase teacher education. The findings show that the real-world experiences afforded students' opportunities for personal meaning making. The realities they confronted created discomfort, disrupted their conventional responses and challenged them to think of solutions that were context-bound.

The building of their professional knowledge stemmed not only from their personal engagements with contextual issues but also through the use of peer learning and relationship building. The students were able to use both tools to enhance their understanding and appreciation of the diverse forces that influence teaching in the Foundation Phase.

It was also evident that the assignment as a catalyst for this study allowed students to cross borders and venture into new environments that they would not have been personally inclined to explore. The border crossing allowed students to engage with categories of difference which has a direct bearing on understanding factors that impinge on young children's learning (generational and language differences). The study also showed that students were able to extrapolate universal human values which allowed for cementing practices that recognised the uniqueness of young children and their education.

The study highlights the importance of paying attention to the experiences afforded students in their initial teacher education programmes. Programme design and environments for learning must take into account learning from real-world experiences and possibilities for engagement with cultural differences. Careful thought needs to be given to service learning, learning exchanges (locally, nationally and internationally), study visits (urban, peri-urban, rural and deep rural), observations and apprenticeships to public and private institutions.

In order to improve the evidence-base of students' learning, amongst other aspects in the Foundation Phase, it is necessary to develop communities of practice that have specific focus-areas in teacher development. This is possible through the activities of the South African Research Association for Early Childhood Education (SARAECE) for birth to nine years. The association is committed to growing research in the field.

Future research with regard to students' learning in the Foundation Phase as general and in the specific subjects could be part of longitudinal studies. This would necessitate interrogation of programme design and learning opportunities in different

contexts. These studies could also improve knowledge and understanding to shape policy and practice in pre-service teacher programmes for the Foundation Phase. Such a response is timely, taking into account that universities in South Africa are involved in curriculum change according to the new minimum standards for teacher education.

Note

- 1 Researcher's code of data: semi-structured interviews (SSI); focus group discussions (FGD); open-ended questionnaires (OEQ)

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