Middle years teachers’ conceptions and adaptive responses to student diversity in the culture of schooling

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Abstract

There is widespread agreement at the policy level that systems of education should be inclusive of an increasingly diverse student population; yet research indicates this to be a deficit area in teaching and learning practices. This research paper employs the sociocultural concept of ‘funds of knowledge’ to consider how teachers draw upon their unique experiences to frame student diversity, particularly related to student ability. We interview four teachers in middle years teaching roles and use content analysis to reveal the ways in which the teachers recognise and name student ability and how this impacts on their practices in relation to teaching and learning. Findings reveal that the teachers describe student ability in ways that reflect their funds of knowledge including aspects of their past, present and future notions of self. Two of the teachers drew upon institutional categories of student diversity that reflect a traditional approach to teaching and learning in order to describe their present practice and to envision the future – an approach to practice that they would have been enculturated into and which serves as their frame of reference. The other two teachers, both of whom are recently educated in the ways of their craft, constructed student diversity in terms of their own pedagogical practice. For them, practice draws on their recent university studies and on past experiences of self to envision a more egalitarian future for themselves and for their students. This research provides an insight into a promising future in addressing the challenge of enacting truly inclusive practices to meet the needs of our diverse student population. Furthermore, it reveals that teachers’ funds of knowledge shape their understandings and practices in ways that can be either limiting or enabling, and that this range of diversity of teachers’ views is currently being played out in classrooms.
Introduction

There is widespread agreement at the educational policy level that systems of education should be inclusive of an increasingly diverse student population. UNESCO identified a focus on ‘Education for All’ and the importance of access to quality education by developing inclusion guidelines (UNESCO, 2009). Over the past few decades educational researchers have devised schemes to describe different learning styles, learning modalities, and approaches to study among students. However, evidence collected from various countries (Fullarton & Lamb, 2002; Hallam, Ireson, & Davies, 2004) has indicated that teachers seldom incorporate recognition of student diversity in their everyday teaching practices except in terms of levels of achievement or ability. This focus is supported by the implementation of state, national and international testing of student achievement and the increasing availability of national and international benchmarks. Schools and school systems have sought to develop school improvement agendas identified by researchers that deliver different outcomes in terms of student literacy, numeracy and science achievement (Maltese & Hochbein, 2012).

This focus on student diversity as level of achievement was reaffirmed in a landmark, large-scale, observational study of classrooms in Queensland, Australia (Education Queensland, 2001) more than a decade ago that resulted in the development of the Productive Pedagogies framework. This framework was used to assess practice relating to 20 pedagogy items arranged into four dimensions: intellectual quality, connectedness, supportive classroom environment, and valuing and working with difference. Importantly, evidence of all four dimensions in classrooms is considered to provide optimum conditions for enhancing learning (Lingard et al., 2001). Of the dimensions, ‘valuing and working with difference’ was the ‘one aspect of the model that has been the source of much debate … [as] very few of the items that make up this dimension were observed in classrooms to any great extent’ (Mills et al., 2009, p. 76). Since 2001 the Productive Pedagogies framework has been used extensively in a range of other research projects. In 2008 it was used again to establish a framework for teaching and learning in the middle phase (Years 4 to 9) in Queensland schools (Goos et al., 2008). Again, this study confirmed that ‘[i]n all year levels the lowest scores were found in the valuing and working with difference dimension’ (Goos et al., 2008, p. 7). The study noted that teachers did not lack commitment to valuing students’ difference, but that ‘at times they were afraid of getting it wrong’ (Mills et al., 2009, p. 76). This level of teacher concern that subsequently carried through as deficits in teaching and learning practices related to working with difference serves as a major imperus for our study.

Difference as ability

Recent policies in many countries that require the comparison of student performance on tests across schools and districts have accelerated the trend for teachers to reduce considerations of diversity to levels of ability. Recently this approach to diversity has been privileged even further in Australia. It is characterised by reductive notions of learning underpinned by neo-liberal managerialist practices that are becoming increasingly evident in both policy responses and the everyday media (K. D. Gutierrez, Asato, Santos, & Contosta, 2002). For example, in early 2007, the Queensland government proposed to mandate streaming of students in Year 8 in order to improve learning outcomes in mathematics and science (Livingstone, 2007).

The policy push for ability groupings at Year 8 is noteworthy. Year 8 fits in the centre of the range of years typically termed the middle years, inclusive of students aged 10 to 15 years. There has been considerable discussion of late about the connection between diversity, teaching practices, and student disengagement from learning. For instance, the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians identifies ‘enhancing middle years development’ as one of eight areas for action. In the declaration the importance of the action is explained as follows:

[M]iddle schooling is an intentional approach to teaching and learning that is responsive and appropriate to the full range of needs, interests and achievements of middle years students in formal and informal schooling contexts (MYSa, 2008).

Therefore, the purpose of our research has been to explore this policy–practice dilemma – a policy that recognises and celebrates student diversity, but a set of policy prescriptions and teaching practices that restrict consideration of student diversity to differences in ability based upon test scores. Our broad set of aims in the research project is to document how middle years teachers recognise and ‘name’ student differences and how this flows into their pedagogical practices. In this paper we focus on the issue of ability as a dominant framing of diversity by teachers.

Funds of knowledge and agency

In researching teachers’ views of diversity, we have employed the sociocultural concept of ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez et al., 1993) to refer to historically developed and accumulated strategies or bodies of knowledge that are essential to the functioning of a community. Similarly, Moll (2000) describes funds of knowledge as the cultural artefacts and bodies of knowledge that underlie everyday activities and practices. In these studies, funds of knowledge was used in relation to research on students’ knowledge and the knowledge resources of their communities. The focus was on how teachers can transform their practices by developing an awareness of their students’ repertoires of knowledge and that of their community. In our research; however, we focus on teachers, and how funds of knowledge are deployed in accounting for schooling practices regarding diversity. We employ funds of knowledge as a potentially productive analytical construct, while remaining open to the possibility for essentialising. We understand these funds as being dynamic, emergent and interational (Gonzalez, 2005). What funds of knowledge are deployed by teachers? How do they vary between teachers? How do teachers take up critical stances towards and within these funds of knowledge?

The last question invokes the notion of teacher agency. In accounting for various schooling practices, teachers can adopt different stances towards the practices they might be reporting. We are interested in uncovering this aspect of agency and tracing its roots in different funds of knowledge deployed by teachers.

Voice

In analysing the talk of teachers with these key research questions in mind, we drew also upon Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of voice. Voices are cultural tools that are always shared, produced, and consumed in relation to broader social and cultural conditions, and inevitably involve issues of identity for the speaker. Our data – that is, the interview transcripts between the researchers and the school teachers – contain social and pedagogical categories that are heteroglossic. Teachers are not viewed as stable and unified figures ventriloquiating a set of dominant discourses. These texts...
or utterances represent meeting places of a range of discursive practices, sites of heteroglossic articulations of various historical, class, and cultural interests competing for power and capital of various types. Overlapping and contradictory voices are evident in the production of institutional and pedagogic practices (Cormack & Comber, 1995). In the process of answering questions and providing accounts of classroom practices, the individual voice of the teacher and the social voices that s/he draws on are always mutually reconstituting. The unit of communication, the utterance, is not only a site where the personal and the social meet, it is a site where the person and the society alike are produced. Identity thus conceived as ‘mediated action’ (Wertsch, 1998), is a point of articulation and suture between discourses and practices, which produce subjectivities and the agency of the individual to take up these practices.

We are interested in the types and range of voices ventriloquated by the teachers as they talk about their practices in relation to diversity. If there is a diminution in the richness of ways of talking about students, why is this so? Have the voices that teachers deploy been restrained or constrained by institutional practices and procedures? In analysing the teachers’ talk we consider whether they speak as a member of the institution reporting official practices and procedures or whether they adopt different speaking positions to critique the practices, and how they situate themselves in different imagined contexts of time and place (past experiences or future possibilities) in order to resist the present practices.

The study
The study theorises diversity as an aspect of institutional and sociocultural practices, rather than a set of inherent individual traits (K. Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Thus, student diversity involves issues of identity and power as it is produced and situated in classrooms and schools while also being constituted and constituting the broader context and the differential status of students’ home communities (d’Abreu, 2005). This view is captured by Cobb and Hodge’s (2002) description of ‘relational diversity’, which encompasses a range of complex issues that become evident when individuals who are members of various local communities and broader groups in wider society come together and participate in classrooms.

Data collection
Four teachers from four separate schools were chosen on the basis of (i) teaching a range of middle years classes (Years 5 to 9) and (ii) catering to a community where incomes were variable and where there had been recent mobility. In eliciting teachers’ funds of knowledge regarding student diversity we interviewed each in a one-on-one situation in a quiet place at their school. We used open-ended questions such as, ‘How would you describe the students in your class?’ We were also interested in how they dealt with such diversity in their teaching practices, so we included questions on whether and how they grouped children, and whether they deployed any schemes regarding different approaches to learning or study styles and modes in planning their teaching activities. The interviews were between 30 minutes to an hour in length. Interviews were transcribed in fine detail in order to facilitate the initial application of content analysis and subsequently other forms of discourse analysis.

The cases
The four teachers, with the pseudonyms Tony, Keith, Jane and Ann, came from different schools. They each had an alternative viewpoint to express but deployed quite different voices in expressing their distinctive forms of agency. We have used short labels to describe the ‘teacher identity’ adopted by the four teachers as a device to communicate some general features of their sense of identity. The four teachers were selected from a larger number of interviewees as they depict the type of polarity in the funds of knowledge and the effect of their experience on understanding student diversity.
Tony – ‘the fixer’

Tony is an experienced male teacher who has taught for what he describes as ‘decades’ in a variety of schools across different parts of Australia. Tony teaches at Hydrangea School (pseudonyms for the schools have been used throughout), a Catholic school in the northern metropolitan suburbs of Brisbane. The school caters for almost 600 preschool to Year 7 students with the majority (88%) from English speaking, middle-class families. During the interview he recalls an incident in his teaching career, stating:

[They needed ... some straightening out so they said ‘Would you (Tony) go in and do it?’]

A number of statements such as this led us to use ‘the fixer’ as a description of Tony’s identity as a teacher. As a male teacher in a predominantly female teaching profession, Tony presents himself as the teacher who is expected to manage difficult student behaviour. He also presents as a teacher concerned to bring wayward students back into the mainstream – to ‘fix’ them so they could participate in the normal routine activities of schooling. In doing this work, he deploys local cultural resources, such as the appeal of football and sporting activities, particularly to boys, as a way of getting them ‘back into line’.

In the first part of the interview, he talks as the institutional representative. He demonstrated a ‘mastery’ of the institutional categories used to sort students into groups at the school. He describes students in terms of gender and ethnicity as well as family structure associated with disadvantage (single parents), and deficit language resources (the English as a Second Language students). These categories have particular institutional salience because funding is tied to the number of children ascertained in specific categories. He provided no commentary on these categories. In talking about how the classroom operated, he returned repeatedly to a hierarchy based on ability. He talked about outcome levels (distributed on a five point scale) and used hierarchical terms to describe types of students in his classes, for example, middle, above middle, down. While he deployed these hierarchies without apparent resistance or paralysis, he also showed minimal personal investment in this institutional script. However, he did show some resistance to the institutional reporting format (outcomes), by revising the parents’ view that this was a difficult format to interpret.

At this point in the analysis, Tony seemed to be comfortable in adopting the current emphasis on grouping by ability and working in hierarchical categories. In recalling an episode from his past; where he was the ‘boss’ (principal) of the school, he provided a strong critique of student labelling and ability grouping. He claimed that ‘every kid deserved to start with a clean slate’. He took up a strong stance and an unpopular stance as an advocate for students to be dealt with in more equitable ways. He talked about diversity here in terms of the problems that kids might encounter with the teacher – a more relational description of diversity than offered in the initial part of the interview, and one that locates the problem in teacher practices rather than student background and inherent characteristics.

Tony’s experience in another time/place enabled his agency here. There is more than mastery of institutional categories in this account of his past. He took a stance that placed him at odds with his colleagues, and the stance was informed by an explicit moral stance, expressed in the comment, ‘every kid deserved to start with a clean slate’.

Ann – ‘the transformer’

Ann is an inexperienced but very competent beginning teacher who completed an honours degree and was regarded as one of the top students in her year. She chose teaching as a career after working in a school where the practice of journeying was deployed as ‘the fixer’ in a hierarchical way. She took up a strong stance, expressed in the comment, ‘I guess it’s about the formation of different kinds of learners.’

This statement captures Ann’s understanding that students are formed as different kinds of learners by the practices they encounter in schools. She works in a school where the practice of journeying was deployed as official policy. Journeying involved placing students from a cluster of same-grade classrooms into ability groups for key subjects such as mathematics and English. Ability levels are determined by tests administered at the beginning of the year. Even though journeying is official policy Ann stated bluntly that she did not follow the practice. This resistance was based explicitly on her teacher education, for in her own words she had read research literature on the self-fulfilling effects of ability grouping. In response to the researcher’s question, ‘Why don’t you journey?’ Ann stated,

[Well, the literature says not to – the writings of Boaler and Slavin. We (the school) are a school that places people in Year 1. Once you are in the bottom class, you never get out of it from what I have read. We have seven Year 5 classes and they are streamed into a top half and a bottom half. You will hear teachers refer to the ‘lowies’ – that is the type of language they use.]

Ann separates herself from her colleagues (that is the type of language they use) by drawing upon research evidence and her confidence in specific experts. But she not only draws on evidence from experts, but also from research literature. Ann can also give an account based on her experience as a teacher. In the interview, she comments that not all students are able to cope with her inquiry and group work approach to teaching. Two new students who were moved to her classroom from another teacher, were described by Ann as self-assured learners who are comfortable and competent doing algorithms and worksheets, but unsure of how to participate competently in inquiry modes of learning. Ann’s understanding of diversity is relational and contextual. Diversity is framed by her as an aspect of pedagogy. Difference is produced through classroom practices rather than being a pre-condition that has to be taken into account.
class. She indicated that the school does have a remedial class for the ‘lower kids’, which provides kids with ‘closer attention’. She did not take up this request since other than by describing the students as ‘lower kids’, who, she said, were capable of achieving. With support students could achieve; ‘lower kids are made aware of what is necessary to get...

For Jane, the relationship between teacher and student is central to her work as a teacher, and like many teachers, identifies teaching as one of the ‘caring professions’. Like many of those in caring professions (e.g. nursing, social work) she re-

voices the mantra of ‘maintaining a professional stance’, by keeping...in order not to get hurt. Like Ann, Jane’s understanding of diversity was relational and diversity was framed as an aspect of her pedagogy – difference was produced through classroom practices and pedagogy. This view she attributed to her personal experiences as a pre-service teacher in ethnically diverse schools and also her experience of being an Aboriginal person.

Keith – ‘the old school’

Keith is an experienced male teacher of science and mathematics who has taught for over 10 years in the senior years of schooling. He teaches at Marigold High School, a government funded Year 8 to 12 school in the suburbs of the Gold Coast. The school caters to 1,000 students largely from English speaking, middle-class families. At the time of this interview, Keith, was teaching Year 8 students because of the philosophy of the school in which he was now teaching. This is explained in the comment:

I am mainly senior science but a small school philosophy is why the principal believes that all teachers must teach in the middle school at some stage. You might not teach them all year, but you should do your turn there.

One consequence of favouring this view of diversity was that Keith sees issues related to student ability such as ‘attention span’ as being problematic to his transmission of curriculum knowledge to a broad range of students in his Year 8 class. He also presents as a teacher concerned to bring a focus on ‘high ability’ students back into the mainstream of schooling, so they could work towards securing Australia’s future.

In discussing this work, Keith took up a professional teacher voice by describing his use of a variety of teaching resources such as textbooks, puzzles and oral questioning techniques as a way of keeping students focused on the task of processing curriculum knowledge. Although he demonstrated mastery of this voice, his stance indicated little support for this way of teaching as he indicated that by using these techniques, he was disadvantaging the ‘high ability’ students in his class.

In the interview, Keith talks as an institutional representative. He demonstrates a ‘mastery’ of the institutional categories used to sort students into groups at the school. He describes students in terms of ability, gender and family structure (e.g. single parent families). Keith not only endorses streaming, but goes on to advocate a strong moral stance that pupils ‘high ability’ students as being ‘our future’. In talking about how his Year 8 classroom operated, he returned repeatedly to a hierarchy based on ability. He talked about ‘ability’ found in the ‘traditional’ relationship that he had with his students, a point that determined for him what it meant to ‘prepare adequately’, to provide work that was of a ‘suitable standard’ and was the basis for establishing criteria whereby progress in learning could be measured and made ‘more satisfactory’. For Keith, this approach to teaching was well accepted by ‘high ability’ students, but became problematic when he was required to manage learning relationships with ‘lower ability’ students who saw this approach to teaching as being ‘a bit abrupt’ and ‘frightening’.

As a male teacher with a predominately traditionalist approach to teaching, Keith presents himself as a teacher who is expected to manage the transmission of curriculum knowledge to a broad range of students in his Year 8 class. He also presents as a teacher concerned to bring a focus on ‘high ability’ students back into the mainstream of schooling, so they could work towards securing Australia’s future.

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As such, Keith’s experience as a ‘traditionalist’ teacher of senior school mathematics and science enabled his agency in his Year 8 classroom. There is more than mastery of institutional categories in this account of his teaching. Through his appropriation and endorsement of this way of managing students, he took a stance that placed him at odds with his ‘lower ability’ students and their parents, and the stance was informed by an explicit moral stance, expressed in the comment, ‘These (high ability kids) are our future and yet we are focusing on the kids that are more needy.’

Discussion

The purpose of our research was to explore the funds of knowledge that teachers draw upon to frame student diversity in the middle years of their schooling. The aim of this paper was to document how four middle years teachers (Tony, Ann, Jane and Keith) recognised and ‘named’ student ability and how this impacted on student learning. This documentation was enabled through employing the sociocultural concept of ‘funds of knowledge’.

The funds of knowledge employed by Tony to described student ability, those from a more traditional sense of teaching that employed hierarchical categories such as low, middle and high, and those from a more relational sense that refer to student confidence and wellbeing, display Tony’s mastery of institutional categories that teachers use to talk about student diversity. However, Tony was not an advocate for grouping students by ability nor did he support institutional accountability mandates that require teachers to report on a myriad of outcomes that a student may achieve in the classroom. As such, Tony, although displaying mastery has not appropriated institutional ways of talking about student diversity. For Tony, it is the teacher-student relationship that impacts on student learning – a relationship that is built on the
premise that ‘every kid deserves to start with a clean slate’. This framing of student difference in terms of ‘positive beginnings’ locates every agency in the relational activity of the classroom, and provides a sense that teaching for Tony is about ‘fixing’ students so that they can ‘fit in’ and, thus, achieve in terms of the curriculum content being presented to them.

Ann may also be said to gain her agency from the relational activity of the classroom. However, unlike Tony, the funds of knowledge that Ann draws upon to understand diversity, professional literature and teacher expertise, are also contextualised around her pedagogy, Difference, for Ann, is produced through classroom practices rather than being a pre-condition of students that need to be ‘fixed’. For Ann, students formed as different kinds of learners by the practices they encounter in schools, an understanding of the teaching–learning relationship encapsulated in her statement, ‘I guess it’s about the formation of different kinds of learners.’ This framing of student diversity in terms of pedagogical practice allows Ann to resist the ‘journeying’ philosophy of her school and provides a sense that teaching for Ann is about ‘transforming’ students, that is, that teaching is about extending student participation in learning beyond institutional categories of ability to exploring curriculum content through participating in inquiry modes of learning.

For Jane, understanding student diversity is all about the teaching–learning relationship. Like Tony, Jane was able to draw on funds of knowledge to talk about student diversity that employed institutional categories such as socioeconomic status and ethnicity; however, categorising students in terms of ability was not part of her repertoire of practice. Unlike Tony and Ann, the context of schooling in which Jane operated did not require her to accept or to resist grouping students according to perceived ability. Managing diversity for Jane, like Ann, was about pedagogy. As such, Jane drew on funds of knowledge to describe diversity that emphasised class discussions, group work and individual work – an understanding of diversity captured in her statement, ‘I’m more or less a ‘discuss it’ kind of person’. This framing of teaching practice in terms of ‘leading discussions’ provides a sense that Jane is a ‘discussant’ who employs personal funds of knowledge related to her Aboriginality and to her own experiences of teaching in diverse schools to describe how students construct knowledge and attain intellectual quality.

For Keith, schooling is about privileging the intellectual quality of high ability students. Drawing upon institutional categories that focus on student ability and its enabling factors such as gender and family structure, Keith accesses funds of knowledge that portray the teacher as a transmitter of knowledge to able students. This framing of diversity in terms of ‘traditional notions’ of schooling provides a sense that Keith is using an image of an ideal future Australia built on the successes of its able students to justify his understanding of student diversity – an understanding based upon the premise that he is ‘old school traditionalist’. Unlike, Tony, Ann and Jane, Keith does not privilege the teacher–learner relationship. For Keith, aspects of relationships that lay outside the ‘didactic’ contract of traditional schooling such as those that require him to be ‘a bit nice to this individual’ do not feature prominently in his future vision for Australia – a vision underpinned by his statement, ‘[T]hese (high ability kids) are our future and yet we are focusing on the kids that are more needy’.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the funds of knowledge that the teachers featured in this paper draw upon to describe student ability reflect aspects of their past, present and future notions of self. For teachers that were educators some years ago such as Tony and Keith, it is not surprising that they draw upon institutional categories of student diversity that reflect a traditional approach to teaching and learning to describe their present practice and to envision a future – an approach to practice that they would have been encapsulated into. For teachers who have been more recently educated in teacher education such as Ann and Jane, it is noteworthy that student diversity is constructed in terms of their own pedagogical practice. For them, their present practice draws on their university studies and on past experiences of self to envision a more egalitarian future for themselves and for their students. This approach aligns with the UNESCO vision of ‘Education for All’ (UNESCO, 2009) and a broader notion of inclusion beyond that of ability.

Our findings suggest that teachers will employ funds of knowledge that focus on the relational aspects of teaching relationship as long as these funds of knowledge are supported in their school communities. It is our observation that, for some teachers, the framing of student diversity in terms of ability is a consequence of perceived accountability requirements to standardised testing regimes, a repertoire of practices that rarely permits teachers to manage student diversity in a manner that promotes the development of teaching practices that go beyond the traditional. It is hoped that some of these teachers will follow Ann’s and Jane’s example and use aspects of Productive Pedagogies to work with and value difference in their classrooms, even though it is regarded as a challenging aspect of teacher’s work. This is an imperative that must be achieved if the goals of the Melbourne Declaration are to be achieved (MCEETYA, 2008). How teachers may be assisted to address this issue in their teaching is of interest for future research.

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