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Restorative pedagogical justice in embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) Knowledges on teaching practicum

Abstract

This project investigated the learning and teaching relationships between pre-service teachers and their supervisors on practicum who specifically engaged with embedding Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in their teaching practice. It explored the negotiations of expectations, role modelling and the interactions that occur between pre-service teachers, their supervising teachers, and teacher education staff involved in supporting teaching practicum. It was designed to develop long-term, future-oriented opportunities for teachers to gain expertise in embedding Indigenous knowledges and perspectives, from an assumption that such practices would constitute restorative pedagogical justice in curriculum decision-making.

Key words: Indigenous knowledges, teaching practice, restorative pedagogical justice.

Introduction

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands upon which our universities are based and also acknowledge that these places have always been sites for learning and teaching. We pay our respect to all our Elders past, present and future.

In this paper we discuss findings from a project which investigated the ways in which preservice teachers embedded Indigenous Knowledges (IK) on teaching practicum. We commence from an assertion that there is a need for recognition and valuing of existing Indigenous Knowledge systems and their rightful place in curricula and pedagogy We argue that such recognition be constituted as a form of “Restorative Pedagogical Justice”,

We define these preservice teacher participants as future curriculum leaders as they demonstrated initiative to embed IK in their practice teaching in this contested field.

Objectives

Specific project objectives included:

- a) Pre-service teachers will be able to identify their own strengths in curriculum innovation and demonstrate successful ways to embed Indigenous knowledge into their practicum via their curriculum decision-making. They will be able to showcase these strengths in their portfolios and applications for teacher registration.
- b) Practicum supervisors will undertake important conversations about assessment of EIP to support and lead future pre-service teachers and their teaching peers in the endeavour of embedding Indigenous knowledge; and,

Context:

As part of the ongoing efforts to 'include' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives as an integral part of the emerging Australian curriculum (ACARA, 2012), what constitutes IK has always been and continues to be keenly contested (Langton, 1992; Nakata, 2007; Lumby, 2010). There are educational policies and curriculum initiatives throughout Australia to include IK in school and university curricula (see for example QSA 2008; EATSIPS website, WA Dept of Ed; Victorian and NSW Departments of Education websites). These initiatives are fuelled by agendas of 'reconciliation', 'equity', 'equality in participation' and 'social justice'. We contend in this paper that there is a need for a restorative pedagogical justice approach for the inclusion of IK in Australian schooling.

Embedding IK and IP in Australian schooling incorporates broad and complex processes including struggles to shift mindsets of non-Indigenous peoples who determine what education should look like and for whom. These agents in curriculum decision-making need tangible reminders about and exemplars of IK in curriculum: a curriculum that justifies the presence of Indigenous cultures, languages and worldviews in everyday life of Australian society, through what Nakata (2011a) calls "natural opportunities" for convergence of knowledges and therefore inclusion in existing Eurocentric curricula. We extend this point on natural opportunities for knowledge convergence by claiming a process of restoration, to restore knowledges that have always been present but do not easily fit within the existing Eurocentric curricula.

Theoretical frameworks:

Restorative justice practices exist because of an acknowledgement of tension between particular groups and thus this reconciling process brings them one step closer to resolving

them. Restorative justice provides “a space for dialogue so that the *humanity* of all involved and affected can be *restored*” (Vaandering, 2011, 324). This is the essence of our adoption of restorative pedagogical justice in this case study and resonates with Nakata’s (2007, 2011b) notions of competing lifeworlds in the cultural interface (2007, 2011b): that all educational decision-making occurs within a contested space, being *the intersection of the Western and Indigenous domains...the place where we live and learn, the place that conditions our lives, the place that shapes our futures and, more to the point, the place where we are active agents in our own lives – where we make our decisions – our lifeworld*” (Nakata, 2002, p.285). RPJ is a space for honouring all the stakeholders involved in the preparation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander preservice teachers as future curriculum leaders. This space invariably accepts, acknowledges and honours the authentic knowledges and perspectives of Indigenous peoples in the practice of teaching and learning. It becomes an effective pedagogical space of not only reconciliation but continuing unbroken sovereignty, and restoring what has been ignored, suppressed and dishonoured as a consequence of Australia’s European colonisation.

At the micro-political level, restoring justice in pedagogical relationships and processes of curricular and pedagogic decision-making occurs daily. Therefore, inclusion of IK in the Australian curriculum is indeed a standard and expected part of teachers’ professional work not only their personal, reconciliatory commitment (QSA, 2008; Phillips, 2012). Our project does illuminate that while IK has found its way into texts defining teachers’ professional work, much more needs to be done before all teachers understand what this implies in their daily curricular and pedagogic practice.

This approach then becomes a collective journey where all educational stakeholders participate in restorative justice processes in Australian schools (Donato 2004). Creating such pedagogies exposes and acknowledges the tensions and resistance, enables reconciliation, and develops agency as the supervising teachers engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous pre-service teachers who seek to embed IK. Restorative pedagogical justice (RPJ) begins when all stakeholders and agents are aware and respectful of each other’s tensions, resistance and agency. Thus, an RPJ approach can highlight critical moments within teaching and learning spaces and particularly within the supervising teacher – pre-service teachers’ pedagogical relationships when embedding Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum.

Qualitative Research: Methods and data collection

This paper presents findings from two cohorts of participants, preservice teachers (n=4) and their supervisors (n=4) and lecturers/field experience staff (n=3) involved in a 4 week teaching practicum in April-May 2012. Data collection was centred around individual and focus group interviews, combined with documents collated, including lesson plans and units of work, written feedback on interim and final prac reports, assessment criteria for professional practice units (university requirements), correspondence between the research team and participants, and participants' own observations/journals.

Findings:

A negotiated space that recognises Indigenous knowledges can yield positive experiences of learning for both pre-service and supervising teachers, allowing both to exercise their agency in IK, as the following excerpts illustrate.

She (teacher) said we have to look online about Indigenous art when outside the window was this mural of art work – so I said - I'll just take the kids outside and she looks at me...that's something the kids have always looked at and she said I did not even see that...they absolutely loved the subject, they really engaged, they wanted to know, make their own drawing... I was so excited. It was great (Yolanda, individual interview).

Supervising teachers' own levels of Indigenous knowledge also impacted upon the preservice teacher's ability to embed IK successfully. Three of the supervising teachers requested to take on a preservice teacher from this project because of their own personal and professional commitment to improving their understanding of IK.

Maree supervised Danielle, recalling a number of instances where Maree initiated and encouraged ways in which Danielle could tackle embedding with Grade 5 in this school practicum, showing a willingness to create the necessary space in the curriculum to do so and the belief in Danielle to successfully undertake the work with her mentoring;

So what we'll do while Danielle's here is that we're working on light reflection within them. One of the really great activities is looking at light through different cultures. What different cultures knew about light in - so we thought we'd just take them to see what we could find out about Aboriginal perspectives of light... through their culture. So, that's what we're going to do (Maree, individual interview)

As experienced teacher, she made constant references to her experiences of engagement with IK and perspectives of other Indigenous people as the basis for that decision-making.

Similarly, Mariah was an Indigenous fourth year Primary pre-service teacher who completed her fourth year Health and Physical Education (HPE) practicum and final internship in the participant cohorts this year, across three different schools. Her internship placement was facilitated by a direct request by the school's liaison to have a project participant at their school, and thus her supervisory relationships at her internship school were heavily influenced by the personal commitment to IK demonstrated by the school liaison (who was not her supervising teacher) but who worked in partnership with her supervising teacher and 'unofficially' mentored her at the school. Neither Ruth nor Ron (her actual supervisor) had completed Crossing Cultures or other more recent initiatives (such as EATSIPS). However, Ruth worked as a university tutor through the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) and had developed numerous professional relationships with Indigenous community groups and individuals through her tutoring work. Ron gave Mariah the opportunity to develop a unit work in SOSE to embed IK in the classroom, including 'physical space' in the back of the classroom to support her pedagogy. Ruth also facilitated Mariah's idea to host Indigenous Games as a lunch time "Prep-Year 7" buddy activity. This transpired into the school's "Smart Moves" daily physical program for the duration of her internship. Ron described Mariah as "*the best prac student I've ever had*".

The experiences of the first cohort of participants reveal that once a pedagogical space is negotiated, some insightful knowledge transmission can occur:

... it brought out an opportunity for the other Indigenous students to have a voice to think... this one was normally very shy, quiet student in the class, he wouldn't say anything and this was his opportunity to say something, to contribute to class, have a voice (Yolanda in focus group).

Restorative pedagogical justice and role modelling in the teacher education program is still developing in Australian curriculum. In this project, two issues became clear: one, that Preservice teachers felt that there were tokenistic levels of induction into Indigenous knowledges in their teacher education courses, and two: that these were considered insufficient to prepare preservice teachers to embrace the opportunities to practice RPJ:

I'd like to see that more in the units that we are learning about, not just like a one off subject like EDB007 and that's it. It needs to be more. Like the lecturers here as well need to do the role modelling... but I think there needs to be some mentoring that needs to happen with the teaching...so I can model it, and go yes! I feel I am comfortable to do something similar to that (Yolanda, individual interview)

The collective lived experiences clearly pronounce the urgency of restoring a pedagogical justice (RPJ) in the efforts of making visible Indigenous knowledges and perspectives in curricula. RPJ is a powerful approach for moving beyond the symbolism of social justice and reconciliation towards empowerment, but RPJ also calls for a deeper critical analysis of the ways in which current practices limit the potential of IK in Australian schooling. It returns the spotlight back to teacher education providers and how the agents with this official pedagogic field (Bernstein, 1990) can role model and lead restorative pedagogical justice in their teaching and learning.

Our project findings confirmed that RPJ is not only possible, but an intensely positive experience for those who embrace it. RPJ can continue to assist educators to interrogate the murky misinformation that exists within the 'corpus of knowledge about' Indigenous peoples, which can otherwise hinder successful embedding of IK. Committing to a respectful platform of engagement with young future curriculum leaders, to acknowledge potential shared agency and work through the tensions truly allows the knowledge that comes from this land to regain its rightful place as informing "the story for all of us" (Battiste, 2002).