



December 2015 Briefing Paper

Seminar Series on Teacher Education for the Changing Demographics of Schooling: policy, practice and research

Calls for reform in teacher education are increasingly made in response to dissatisfaction with student performance and poor learning outcomes, particularly relating to the long tail of underachievement of specific groups such as students from ethnic minorities, those living in poverty, or those who may have additional needs associated with disability or language. This ESRC seminar series brings together key stakeholders to consider the implications of the research evidence underpinning teacher education for diversity and to articulate a framework for further research in the field. The seminars are designed to address a set of integrated themes to allow for the development of evidence-informed ideas on how to prepare teachers for the changing demographics of schooling.

This briefing paper summarises presentations and discussions of the final seminar held on 1 December 2015. The paper aims to stimulate further discussion with colleagues in teacher education.

Seminar 6 – Teacher education cultures and environments

This seminar explored key issues around creating a shared research agenda for the study of inclusive teacher education, and the implications for developing critical teacher education and reflective educators. The papers in this seminar considered the following themes:

- A dynamic model of research on inclusive teacher education
- Student-teachers' attitudes towards culturally diverse classrooms, and perceptions of their readiness to teach in such contexts.
- Listening to EAL student voices in Scotland and England

Presentations

Linda Blanton (Florida International University) and Marleen Pugach (University of Southern California) addressed the problem of research on inclusive teacher education being fragmented and imbalanced, and the need for developing a shared research agenda among teacher education researchers. The paper presented a model for research that takes into account the structures and content of what they termed

‘inclusive teacher education’ as well as the complexity and context in which inclusive teacher education is practiced within and across nations. The model is based on shifting conceptions in the discourse of inclusive teacher education around understandings of diversity and disability/difference, meanings of inclusive education, communities for pre-service learning and conceptions of practice. They suggested that the model might serve as a filter for designing research, and also as a scaffold to reframe discourses and practices of inclusive teacher education.

Ninetta Santoro (University of Strathclyde) presented her mixed methods research on the attitudes of a cohort of Scottish student-teachers towards culturally diverse classrooms, and their perceptions of their readiness to teach in such contexts. The results revealed a number of key challenges the student-teachers experienced in understanding their students: the lack of confidence in culturally diverse social contexts (including lack of contact with culturally diverse others, fear of language barriers, fear of different cultural mores), lack of confidence in culturally diverse classrooms (including inadequate teacher education, lack of experience in such classrooms) and the lack of knowledge about their own enculturation. She argued that in order to overcome these barriers, developing critical teacher education as well as the cultural diversification of teachers and teacher educators is essential.

Charles Anderson, Yvonne Foley and Pauline Sangster (University of Edinburgh) presented research on the perceptions of EAL learners of their language learning experiences in secondary schools in Scotland and England. Among the many findings reported, some included students having contrasting views about the value attached to a first language, positive views of having more than one language, linguistic and social isolation and their emotional impact, the differentiated help from teachers, and the importance of teachers’ supportive attitudes and recognition of the emotional challenges faced by EAL learners. They outlined recommendations and implications for teacher development; responsive school policies, structures and processes; development of inclusive environments; instructional practices; curriculum and assessment; and representations of EAL students.

Implications for teacher education

The following questions were raised in the discussion after the presentations:

1. Who is our community and how do we establish it? Who are teacher educators in university-based pre-service teacher education and school-led teacher education for inclusion? How do teacher educators who do not associate with markers of diversity (race, culture, language, disability) fit in the model?

The authors of the model suggested that community is whoever is involved in the conversation; they are not necessarily fixed but it is important that colleagues who ordinarily do not work together begin the conversation about how to break down the silos that divide the broader teacher education community.

2. Is the model to map out what we know about inclusion or how we can build more inclusive practices? Student teachers come out of teacher education programmes with good ideas but in practice they feel it's so difficult to implement these ideas. How can the model help? Could the authors highlight what the model is and what it is not?

The model is more about where we need to go in addition to where we are. It can be used to improve teacher education while developing inclusive practice. Student teachers bring different experiences of diversity. We need to acknowledge different starting points of students and colleagues. The big challenge is to ask teacher educators to teach students in ways that they didn't teach themselves. Local, regional and national contexts also matter.

3. Methodological silos exist in addition to substantive ones so how can the model address those? Does the model inform not just design but analysis?

The authors do not take a methodological stance but lean towards the use of rigorous mixed methods.

4. How does discourse of egalitarianism in Scotland affect student teachers' attitudes towards culturally diverse classrooms? How helpful are teacher standards around cultural diversity?

It was suggested that egalitarian discourse means that students think they don't need to engage with the issues around diversity. Standards can be a form of professional gatekeeping that prevent people who trained as teachers in different countries from entering the profession.

5. How can we change the profile of teaching profession? When we think of cultural diversity it is about the other and not ourselves. What assumptions do we make about the other when we think we are 'normal'? Is reflection on our own diversity an essential point for dialogue? What are the challenges and possibilities?

Teacher education needs to be broadened, for example, by providing students with international experience and preparing them, e.g. by reading postcolonial texts and on whiteness. Another example is getting students to reflect on their practice – why they engage with students in particular ways; and/or by challenging assumptions about difference.

6. Notion of EAL learners as resource is very important. What disallows teacher educators at local level from giving messages to student teachers that their pupils are resources? Where do we intervene?

Often interventions target individual rather than classroom environment and pedagogy. Enabling students to activate their agency to draw on linguistic resources is about a sense of belonging, participation in the life of the school community where everyone is recognised, and not whether you can articulate six sentences in English. School can sometimes be a place that kills the spirit of students.

7. How comfortable are we as teacher educators to respond to comments like “I have an Ethiopian student who knows nothing”? How do we create cognitive dissonance?

A recent PISA report showed that the presence of migrant students did not lower achievement – it is how students are included that is important– how education is organised. The notion of resource is very important.

8. How would we as teacher educators support student teachers to develop the knowledge and skill to teach linguistically diverse students? What language and concepts do we give them to talk about these issues? For example, the notion of pupils as resources is helpful.

It is interesting to think about the lessons from seminar presentations. On the one hand there are teachers who do not feel qualified to teach linguistically diverse students yet they are a resource to the classroom community. Perhaps teachers need to learn to suspend judgement, to let go of feeling they need to be in control. Teachers are uncomfortable with not knowing, because of concerns that they might be judged incompetent.

Implications for future research

1. How can questions around teachers responding to diversity within a larger framework become a foundational part of teacher education?
2. How do we keep the balance between general concerns with everybody, and remain specific enough to meet different needs, both in our research agenda and work as teacher educators?
3. How can we use research and insights from colleagues in our own institutions who are focusing on teachers responding to particular kinds of diversity?
4. The knowledge base around these issues remains scant and fragmented, and so it is important to have conversations across the silos that divide teacher education communities.