

Principal's Teaching Award Project

Future Professionals' Perceptions of the Impact of Programme Curriculum, Pedagogies and Wider University Environment on their Development as Agents of Social Justice

Final Report

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Aim and objectives

This project explored students' perceptions of their roles, practices and contexts for acting as agents of social justice. The concept of teacher agency for change has increasingly been promoted in the literature and policies of teacher education, often in relation to social justice. Issues of social justice also often feature in the aims and objectives of various degree programmes encouraging graduates to 'apply' theoretical knowledge in practice. However, this can be problematic when theoretical knowledge is contested or inconsistent with the practices in their future workplaces in which the impact of these programmes is situated. The project was designed to enable a distinction between the domains of professional agency that can be supported in university degree programmes (including teachers' 1) sense of purpose, 2) competence, 3) autonomy and 4) reflexivity), and the structures and cultures of the workplace that might support or impede agency for social justice. The objective were:

- To explore the influence and impact of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes at the School of education on students' perceptions of their roles, practices, and contexts for acting as agents of social justice
- To examine how other aspects of university life (e.g. student societies, volunteering and events) influence these perceptions
- To explore innovative approaches to the preparation of professionals as agents of social justice

Study design

We conducted a mixed method study to generate data about the four aspects of teacher agency using questionnaires, interviews, scenario-based tasks and reflective logs. 302 students participated in the study from three programmes in the Moray House School of Education including: M.A. and BEd in Primary Education (Moray House School of Education, ETL); M.A. and BEd in Physical Education (Moray House School of Education, SPEHS); and MSc in Social Justice and Community Action (Moray House School of Education, ECS). Out of the target group of 500 students, 299 responded to the questionnaire administered online and in hard paper copies. Twelve students have been interviewed, with nine undergraduate students also responding to scenarios in simulated interviews and six students participating in the reflective logs around a particular situation involving issues of social justice. Tutors on the relevant programmes developed the scenarios. All the data was generated between April and September 2015.

Questionnaire data were processed using SPSS, version 22. All qualitative data was analysed through a combination of open and deductive coding using previously established codes adapted after the researchers co-coding 10% of interview data. Two reflective logs were also co-coded by one of the participating students to improve the reliability of interpretations. The codes were based on the four aspects of agency.

Summary of findings

The main findings are presented for each aspect of teacher agency:

Sense of purpose - professionals' perceptions of their role and understanding of social justice

1. By and large, the participants see acting as agents of social justice as integral part of their professional roles alongside, and as more important than implementing prescribed procedures.
2. Although students perceived agency as part of their professional roles, they also expressed concerns about the extent to which they are able to take actions.
3. Participants largely saw themselves as responsible for meeting the needs of pupils with diverse needs.

Competence as agents of social justice - understanding major influences on injustices and how they can address these influences in their practices

4. Participants' perceptions of their competence as agents referred primarily to their individual practice, less to the engagement with institutional and even less with broader social contexts.
5. Undergraduate students mostly discussed how what they did depended on the wider system or other teachers around them.
6. For the postgraduate students, agency for social justice had to involve the engagement of the society at large or at different levels.

Autonomy - decision making and positioning in relation to other relevant actors

7. Participants made decisions about the kind of actions that they might take based on what they perceived as their roles as teachers; their perception of what is fair for the child in the scenario; what effect the situation might have on the child's learning experiences; and how they perceived the role of others (i.e. school management, parents, and other children) in the scenario.
8. Some of the main opportunities students recognised for exercising agency include: building relationships with parents and pupils; modelling fairness, and seeing a child holistically.
9. Students' perceived some of the major constraints in institutional settings, getting parents' to be involved, and difficulties in challenging expected norms.

Reflexivity - a capacity to analyse their practices and institutional settings

1. By and large, the participants perceived the curricula and pedagogies employed in the participating programmes as enabling for them to act as agents of social change.
2. Participants from the masters programme appeared to engage in a broader reflection and identified various ways in which they were capable of transforming their context of practice as compared to students on the undergraduate programmes.
3. Few students from the Moray House School of Education participated in any university wide extra curricular activities around issues of social justice

Project outputs and dissemination

These findings have been presented at several university-based and international events, including:

- Moray House School of Education Research-led Teacher Education Network (RTEN) seminar, 14th January, 2016.
- Moray House School of education Cross-research cluster seminar, 12th April 2016.
- British Educational Research Association (BERA) Conference, Leeds, 15th September, 2016
- Another paper led by the RA has been accepted for presentations at the Australian Association of Research in Education (AARE) Conference in Melbourne, 27 November - 1st December 2016.

The discussions in these events explored the ways in which the findings can inform our own and other university course and programme developers as they seek to develop both conceptual and practical tools to help students make connections between the theory and practice of social justice in education, and prepare students for the uncertainty of their future workplaces.

Finally, the research paper co-authored by three project team members has been submitted to an internationally peer-reviewed Journal of Teacher education: **Pantić, Taiwo & Martindale (submitted). Roles, practices, and contexts for acting as agents of social justice - student teachers' perspectives.**

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