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Models of student engagement: Pre-service teachers supporting community development through process drama

# Community placement

- This presentation reports on a project involving 15 undergraduate **final year primary teaching students**
- Elective specialisation – Drama
- Students were placed in **community settings** as part of their field experience between February – April 2012

## Group breakdown

- Five groups with three students in each group

We are fortunate that community based adult education is an integral part of life in Limerick city for many years.

# Community groups

- Men's group
- Women's group
- Active retirement group
- After school club
- Family

# Why community setting?

- There is a growing recognition that professional learning is significantly enhanced by offering authentic experiences in **non-traditional partnership learning sites** (Butin 2005, Tochon, 2000)
- Elliot and Calderhead (1995) see teacher education as a complex and multi-dimensional learning process that involves **changes in knowledge, beliefs and skills**

# Why drama?

- Drama was chosen as the core methodology as it embodies principles of **critical pedagogy** (Boal)
- Educators employing principles of critical pedagogy aim to develop their students' capacities for **critical judgment** and commitment to the social world (Giroux, 2006)

- Proponents of educational drama argue that it supports students holistic development, it requires students to assume **responsibility, accept and make decisions, and work cooperatively** (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995)
- Drama is an important **subject and pedagogical tool**, it enabled students gain a deeper understanding of content and culture through the process of **enactment, dialogue, and exploration** (Murphy and O’Keeffe, 2006)

# Project Aims

- Provide a different **context** for student learning through **collaboration with community groups (adults)**
- **Challenge** pre-service teachers to disrupt their perceptions about learning and pedagogy through engagement with a different 'type' of learner
- Develop pre-service teachers professional practice in the area of **drama education**
- Support **community empowerment** through **partnership**

The community placement was a **departure from the traditional school placement** previously experienced by students.

# Previous placements

- Mary Immaculate College provides a very comprehensive school placement programme. According to the Teaching Council the school placement should afford the student teacher opportunities to participate in school life in a way that is structured and supported
- Set **prescribed curriculum** for each year level
- These placements are supported and assessed by the placement supervisor
- Supervisor observes a lesson (s) and provides verbal feedback to the student

# My Role

- Students to take full ownership of the content and delivery of the programme
- Take risks with the pedagogy
- Develop 'teacher identity'
- Supervision – students would be given full autonomy with content and drama methodology, I would not observe them teach
- Emotional support
- Equal relationship with student (peer)

‘Going it alone’

Goodland ( 1990)

# Assessment

- Self- assessment
- Submit reflective log and essay

# Essay

- How have you challenged yourself, your ideals, your philosophies about teaching and learning in the context of community work?
- Has learning through this placement taught you more, less, or the same as learning in the classroom? In what ways?
- How might your experiences on this placement influence your future practice as a primary teacher?
- What have you learnt about the role of drama to enhance community partnerships?

# Data Analysis

- Pre-service teacher's experiences of working in community settings was analysed using data from their reflective logs
- I will present an overview of some of the findings

# Findings

Findings revealed that students had to negotiate a number of challenges during the placement.

- Class difference
- Content/power
- Relationship
- Leadership

# Class difference

*One of my first challenges as being from a middle class 'privileged' background, possibly regarded as an 'outsider', was how to ease this boundary....drama supported this process...as we got to know each other in an informal environment ....I gained their trust.... ....*

*I stopped thinking about these people as being 'different', I think drama was useful as we all 'played' together...*

*In community work the emphasis is on building bridges and relationships and a sense of togetherness. Drama helped me achieve this....*

# Content - Power

Pre-service teachers discovered that the community members wanted to have an input into the content of the sessions ...previously the primary curriculum had been the guiding document ...

# Content - Power

*I felt nervous when they weren't interested in what we had decided to do with them.....*

*We had to change our content on the spot...I wasn't used to doing this...I usually followed my lesson note...*

*They seemed to want to decide the direction of the lesson...we were led by them...*

*We decided to enable the group to share their own stories associated with the past using drama methodology*

# Content - Power

*As the weeks progressed I began to feel more comfortable with the idea that the group offered feedback on what we were doing ....I was delighted that the group were able to stand up and share their interests with us....*

*I think drama facilitated this as it gives participants a voice in decision making ...*

# Relationship

Students classified building relationship as another area which was different to their previous experience of working in the primary classroom.

*During previous placements in the primary school I was able to hold on to my 'authority', this resulted in a different type of relationship with the children...I value the importance of having a relationship with the children but this placement was different, I was dealing with adults...I was one of them....*

*I discovered the importance of giving the women a chance to talk about their ideas and changes they would like to make to the drama...this was different to my work with children as I usually decided the content of the lessons for them based on the curriculum ... drama helped me do this as its all about negotiation...*

*My experience of this placement has changed my outlook on disadvantage areas and development my understanding and listening skills.. ..I had more of a facilitating role which gave me time to sit back and listen to the women and their ideas rather than tell them what to do...*

*This will undoubtedly benefit me as a teacher ...I think I will place more value on the importance of building a more meaningful relationship with the children and hearing their opinions about what is covered in the lessons....*

# Leadership

*I feel I have really gained a lot of confidence ...I never thought I could teach adults...I feel this will help me with my interaction with parents and fellow teachers in the future....*

*I would like to start my own or support an existing community program in the future....*

# Conclusion

When positioning students in this placement I was conscious of finding ways of **broadening students existing experience of teaching and learning.**

- The findings revealed that the students became **co-creators of knowledge**
- Placing students in a community setting coupled with the use of drama as a pedagogical tool ‘forced’ students to develop a critical stance about their previous practices in relation to teaching and learning
- They developed a deeper understanding of the importance of critical democratic pedagogy
- Traditional boundaries between student and teacher were challenged - **all teach and all learn** (Freire)

- This placement enabled me to challenge the notion of knowledge transfer from faculty to students
- It is hoped that placing pre-service teachers outside their comfort zone might better prepare pre-service teachers for the complexity of their work as future educators
- Broke down power relationships between institutions and communities

# Performance in the Lime Tree Theatre, Limerick

# Summary

Findings revealed that students initially found it challenging to move from an 'all knowing position' to a power sharing position. It was felt that drama supported this transition, as it requires the teacher and the student to negotiate meaning together.

The placement empowered members of the community and the students to negotiate their identities as teachers and community learners. Students learnt to value and understand the importance of supporting community partnership.

They developed a deeper understanding of the link between their students, their student's families, and their student's communities as a central part of the learning continuum. This placement enhanced student enquiry, engagement and empowerment. Students developed an understanding of the role of drama in community settings and concurrently developed skills and understanding of the art form.

# Thank You

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