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Third year pre service teachers in a Bachelor of Education course keep a narrative journal in which they record and reflect on the changing nature of their participation in the school communities they visit. As prospective teachers, they are thus provided with an opportunity to explore their identity as emergent pedagogues through reflection on prior learning and current educational theory, debate and classroom practice. However, there is mounting evidence that, in addition to reflection on diverse teaching and learning situations, prospective teachers also visualise themselves in imagined communities (Anderson, 1991) and/or, experience belonging as participants in communities of practice in which they engage and align with new horizons and imagine ‘new images of the world’ (Wenger, 1998). This paper explores engagement, imagination and alignment as three dimensions of belonging (Wenger, 1998) and seeks to gauge the extent to which belonging and imagined communities influence the visualisation and emergence of one’s future identity as a teacher.

Conceptualising Imagined Communities and Communities of Practice

Imagined communities were first identified by Benedict Anderson (1991). His thesis argues that nations as we know them are imagined communities. The nation ‘is imagined because the members will never know most of their fellow-members…yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (Anderson, 1991:6). The nation is a ‘community because, regardless of the actual inequality…that may prevail…the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship’ (Anderson, 1991:7). This vision of nation helps individuals to ‘feel a sense of community with people…not yet met’ (Kanno and Norton, 2003:241). Juxtaposed to Anderson’s notion of participation in idealised situations is Wenger’s perspective of participation and engagement in actual communities of practice (1998:45) wherein the imagination is similarly engaged and we create ‘new images of the world and ourselves’ (Wenger 1998:176).

An important dimension in any community involvement is one’s sense of belonging. Wenger proposes three dimensions to belonging, namely ‘engagement, imagination and alignment’ (Norton, 2001:163, Wenger, 1998). Engagement deals with the strategies employed in social and contextual situations we experience; imagination is the domain of goals and expectations wherein we create ‘new images of the world and ourselves’ (Wenger, 1998:176): it is the realm of possibility and striving in which we seek an understanding of the worlds we have heard about but not seen or the worlds we have never encountered (Holt, 1971); alignment refers to the extent to which ‘we coordinate our energies and activities in order to fit within broader structures’ (Norton
on Wenger, 2001:163) or stated in another way, the degree to which we take a stance in particular lived or imagined experiences. Current research on the role of imagination in learning and identity (Greene, 1995; Wenger, 1998; Norton, 2001; Kanno and Norton, 2003) is increasing and there is evidence to suggest ‘that these imagined communities are no less real than the ones in which learners have daily engagement and might even have a stronger impact on their current actions and investment’ (Kanno and Norton, 2003:242).

This investigation looks at a particular group of learners, namely, pre service teachers. Pre service teachers bring their aspirations to the table when they engage in classroom and pedagogical discourse and learning and this involvement can be influenced, in considerable measure, by their beliefs about their chosen profession (Graves, 2000). It is proposed, in this paper, that the imagined communities pre service teachers envisage, in their goal setting, or the communities of practice they participate in, may constitute an important part of a shifting identity phenomenon experienced during the teaching practicum (Whitehead, Lewis, Rossetto, 2006) and thus, represent an important measure of the degree of investment they are prepared to commit in their role as ‘active creators of their own occupational perspectives’ (Goodman and Fish, 1997:101).

It is important to identify whether imagined communities and the related imagined belonging in communities of practice, work in ways that provide a sustainable, harmonious interaction for participants in the learning environment or whether they, in fact, may encourage ‘a politics of exclusion which perpetuates modes of domination’ (Pratt, 1987: 56).

**Introducing the study.**

This study explores both idealised and actual participation in the school community as visualised and/or evaluated by a group of nine pre service teachers who kept a reflective journal over the course of a semester. In the journal, the prospective teachers wrote of their imagined persona as a pedagogue and their visions of anticipated qualities and classroom settings, before participating in a teaching practicum of four weeks’ duration. After the practicum they further reflected on the extent to which time spent in the community of practice (Wenger, 1998) had confirmed, affirmed or negated their initial motivation.

The research was undertaken using a narrative inquiry approach and an interpretive framework for discussion of the data. The investigation included a reading of the volunteered journals with a focus on both imagined and/or experiential reflections. The purpose of the inquiry was twofold. In the first instance, its aim was to seek an understanding of the degree to which imagined communities might have played a supportive role in the pre service students’ preparations for practicum. In the second instance, the investigation sought to identify whether the practicum experience itself was helpful in affirming the pre service teachers’ imaginings; whether they experienced engagement, alignment and visualisation which inspired them to pursue new scenarios with real or imagined outcomes or whether the prior vision of an imagined community was disturbed dramatically and, if so, with what degree of positive or negative outcome. Fictitious first names have been used to refer to the prospective teachers who participated in this study in the ‘discussion of data’ section of this paper.

Of the nine pre service students who agreed to participate in this investigation, there were five male and four female participants. When asked to identify the characteristics that would identify them as a teacher in their upcoming practicum the students were invited to imagine how they might look and behave. This reflection was made in week two of semester one of the third year of their studies in education, before undertaking their first teaching practicum experience in middle
schooling. They were further asked to reflect after the practicum in the light of initial imaginings and alignments.

**Discussion of the Data**

Of the five pre service male teachers, two declined to participate in imagining their characteristics as a future teacher in week two. One of these, Matthew, was only prepared to declare in week fourteen, well after the practicum, that he had always known that ‘creating a positive work environment was important’ but that he hadn’t known ‘what strategies to use to achieve this’. However, in post practicum reflection, he expressed a positive reaction when he wrote that he had not realised ‘the importance and possibility of fostering relationships between students’ His overall feeling was that imagining and reflecting had been arduous tasks because he had ‘struggled to complete (his) journal and didn’t think he would ‘continue to write one’. Ostensibly, it would seem that Matthew had not experienced any belonging through imagining, yet it would seem that via engagement and alignment in the school situation, his prior, inner belief in ‘creating a positive work environment’, an imagined community, had been affirmed.

The second pre service, male teacher, Jeffrey, who had declined to imagine himself as a future teacher before the practicum, was adamant that the teaching experience had been worthwhile and had taught him a great deal. He believed that he had become ‘a much more confident person’ who felt strongly that he had chosen ‘his suited career’. He reflected that he was ‘able to criticise the way in which the students are sat, the dull environment and distraction which the students face’. He had also been uplifted by a practicum experience in a year 7 SOSE class in which he had played ‘an active role’ with a behaviour management issue. He felt pleased with his handling of the situation because there had been ‘a positive response from students’ and because he had been able ‘to identify the issues and appropriate strategies to put into place’. Jeffrey’s reflection supports engagement and alignment with the students ‘in his care in the community of practice and entirely negates his tacit, imagined world of fears, beforehand, in which he had situated himself as unwilling to ponder future pedagogical situations.

The third male respondent, John, imagined a community in which he would be able to ‘enact (his) ideology of respect, honesty and trust’ and remain ‘motivated, interested and enthusiastic’. By the end of his engagement during the practicum, John remained sustained by alignment to his imagined community, notwithstanding the malpractice he had witnessed: ‘I’m all for democratic processes and social justice in the classroom. I was sickened by some of the power mongers and megalomaniacs I saw while on prac. I really don’t ever want to be like that.’

Male respondents, Michael and Benjamin, both responded with brief imaginings of their future characteristics as pedagogues. Michael imagined himself as more at ease, save that he would ‘have more knowledge of how to respond to students and Benjamin summed up his imagined self in four words ‘professional, approachable, honest (and) friendly’. Pre service teacher, Michael discovered his belonging and commitment to his chosen profession in strong waves of imagined alignments. In his imagined world he would make learning magical by calling on students to ‘create their ideal world…(he would) act as a guide and suggest areas to include on their map…such as race tracks and road systems to boys with no interest in geography’. This was in response to an enacted non-engagement issue he had faced on the practicum when students were assigned a task of ‘constructing a landscape using topographical mapping’ He knew, instinctively, that ‘using pre constructed maps…to learn the terminology’ would ensure that most students would ‘be quite bored’. Prospective teacher, Benjamin, on the other hand, remained monosyllabic and declined to reflect in his journal from weeks six to thirteen and finished in week fourteen with
the serious observation that ‘if you can’t respect others’ opinions then failure is inevitable’. It was evident that respect/honesty were part of any of his real and/or imagined communities with few cathartic or transitional turning points as a consequence of his participation in an actual community of practice.

Female prospective teachers Sally and Hilda did not participate in the practicum but volunteered their imaginings in week two. Sally thought that as a teacher she would be ‘different: more in control, more well groomed; relaxed, patient, kind, have a good knowledge base; be compassionate, responsible, culturally sensitive, have plenty of empathy and be fair and approachable’. She lived up to her visualised characteristic of responsibility by observing classes and listening to reports from peers, even though she was unable to do the actual practicum herself. As a participant observer she recorded hearing that ‘many of the teachers were quite old and negative’ but concluded that she would remain optimistic and was in fact, keen to see for herself. She was ‘looking forward to teaching practicum to see what it’s really like; not nervous or anxious but hopeful that (she) can engage students and that they’ll want to listen to (her).

Respondent Hilda was not inclined to daydream about her future as a teacher in week two and commented that ‘I don’t know what characteristics will identify me as a teacher’ She was hopeful, nevertheless, that it would be by her ‘approachable demeanour and good sense of humour combined with an air of authority and knowledge’ and to land with a strike for reality she closed her reflection with an acknowledgement of her status as a mature aged student by concluding that: ‘I do know that I will have significantly more grey hair.’ In a final stroke of optimism, however, Hilda presented her imagined community where she dared to dream: ‘I hope very much that I am like my daughter’s Year 9 Math teacher who “makes it fun” and has made a girl who hated Math in Yr. 7&8 into one who thinks it’s OK simply due to the influence of her teacher.’ Reflecting in the post practicum phase of journal writing, even though she had not attended the practicum, Hilda evaluated her progress as minimal and felt that this was due to her non engagement with a community of practice: ‘at this stage neither my personal, interpersonal nor my professional identities have developed to any great level; I am sure that this will occur at a much greater level when I undertake my practicum.’ Hilda did, however, undertake some peer mentoring in schools and these varied encounters, combined with group discussions with fellow students, left her still optimistically in pursuit of her dream: ‘Undertaking this journal did allow me to question my suitability to be a teacher and …I feel more confident that it is a profession that I am both suitable for and will enjoy’. She confirmed her initial goal of wanting to reach students and expanded her place in the imagined community of her profession, by sharing her now affirmed belief: ‘A significant learning for me during this semester was the potential influence that a teacher can have on motivating students to complete their studies; this has highlighted for me the reasons why I want to be a teacher.’

Prospective teacher, Rachel, found the community of practice very different from her imagined community in which she declared, in her own words, that she hoped ‘to be able to constantly learn and adapt to the needs of the individuals I’m working with. I want to earn the respect of the students I teach by showing that I care for them, that I care about the world and what I teach and by working hard. I’m looking forward to not only teaching but learning from the students.’ Her community of practice provided many moments of disillusioned engagement but she still aligned herself with her visions and these sustained and affirmed her goal to continue in her chosen profession because she still felt ‘that teachers and the school can give a child safety and opportunity’ even though she had observed that ‘learning can be interrupted by so many things, especially family situations and drugs’. Her reaction to a Yr 12 student’s presentation of a wrestling demonstration is significant. Rachel noted that ‘although many people found the
demonstration distasteful, it was important for that boy – to show us what he’s good at and receive praise, claps and cheers’. She concluded that the ideal world of her imaginings was still possible if only events could raise people’s awareness of the struggles and hardships students face outside the walls of the classroom: ‘if only there were enough people and resources to help every child the world would be a better place.’ She also ended on a note of realism, disheartened perhaps, but not defeated: ‘today in our SOSE tutorial we all shared information about our prac; overall there wasn’t a lot of great SOSE teaching – it seems still a lot like when I was in school. I don’t think this undermines the validity (of what we may try to do)...but it means ...it’ll be a challenge … You wonder if they were as idealistic as I am when they were at Uni? And what happened to change that? And will it happen to me? I hope not because it doesn’t seem like a good thing.’

Prospective teacher, Angelina’s imagined world was full of ‘ideals and motivations’ but she had ‘very little idea how to employ them’. She visualised herself relating ‘to the majority and, most importantly, the minority of the class’ and hoped that engagement with her community of practice would ensure that her confidence increased. During the practicum she had to grapple with issues that challenged her imagined community of equity and she reflected on many challenging issues such as: ‘How do you be nice to a student who is irritating you, every day at school?’ However, alongside this there were experiences that affirmed her beliefs: ‘On the more positive side, there are some amazing things that the students are doing in class. For example, we had a new girl starting in class this week. When students had to break into groups, one girl came straight over and invited her to join their group. It was such a good feeling to see that.’ By the end of the practicum and the weeks following, Angelina reflected that she had not wanted to leave her school, because in spite of the many challenges she was affirmed in her beliefs and imaginings: ‘when the school practicum ended I wanted to trade it in for University...it was a challenging experience and I loved all the trials and tribulations that were thrown my way…I know now that I still have more to learn before I leave..’

Conclusions

Imagination, as researched in this paper, does not represent a flight from reality but rather a dimension of belonging. It is the way in which humans introduce ‘new images of possibility and new ways of understanding one’s relation to the world’ (Norton, 2001:163 on Wenger, 1998). Seven of the nine prospective teachers in this study had very distinct visions of the teacher they would like to be, albeit with sometimes little idea of how to make the imagined community a reality in the community of practice. However, in the actual practicum which seven of them experienced, the ideals generated in their imagined communities came to represent the terms of their investment (Norton, 2001) in their chosen profession and provided a means whereby they could weigh a situation with a surprisingly clear measuring stick. Thus for every day of irritation, there were the days when perseverance, motivated by inner belief, brought uplifting outcomes, as the discussion has revealed.

This study has found evidence of idealism serving as a buffer against existing tensions between dominant and dominated groups. This group of pre service teachers did not appear to view equality of opportunity as a dictated vision of equality from a white perspective, ‘ based on the assumption that all people are created equally and experience the world equitably’ (Milner, 2005:780). They viewed it rather as a right, relative to the needs of the individuals in their care, as the wrestling incident and the episode relating the acceptance of the new student, illustrated.

Norton’s research has suggested that course structures may encourage resistance and non-participation if there is ‘a disjuncture between the learner’s imagined community and the
…curriculum goals’ (Norton, 2001:170). This discussion supports Norton’s notion of the crucial role of course content. The reflective writing encouraged in the pre service course, undertaken by the participants in this study, has encouraged the incipient development of a sense of critical reflection in which they noted binaries identifying those in control and their subordinates, with an example being John’s reflection on megalomaniacs. Opportunities to write, reflect, discuss in groups and imagine appear to have provided opportunities for them ‘to be effective teachers of diverse students’ (Causey, Thomas and Armento, 2000:33). It is suggested that an overarching framework, such as this course structure that includes the writing of a professional journal, has presented an arena for a critical multiculturalism in which reflections made by the prospective teachers in this study demonstrated that they were not ‘influenced by difference blindness’ and were furthermore aware of the damaging outcomes possible in certain ‘pedagogical approaches’ (Kubota, 2004: 37-38). This opportunity to reflect critically has revealed that these prospective teachers have managed to avoid one of the pitfalls of naïve egalitarianism (Causey, Thomas and Armento, 2000:37), namely the belief that a teacher will be able to reach all students, regardless of extenuating circumstances.

In sum, this study has provided a significant discussion of the educational and professional possibilities that may be found in imagined communities and imagined identities in communities of practice and has noted the considerable ways in which they may work to influence the visualisation and emergence of one’s future identity as a teacher.
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