The implication of the multiple contexts for teaching and learning on student academic identity within professional education

Nicola Dunham
Unitec Institute of Technology New Zealand
ndunham@unitec.ac.nz

Abstract:
With the move to mass education the interest of higher education institutions in professional education has taken on a new emphasis in the 20th century (Moodie, 2008). Professional education does not necessarily occur in isolation from wider societal contexts of learning and this is particularly evidenced in field-based Early Childhood Initial Teacher Education programmes which draw simultaneously on the multiple contexts of the training institution and early childhood centres within the community. As field-based Early Childhood Initial Teacher Education programmes draw on the teaching and learning from these multiple contexts being a student has the potential to hold a multiplicity of meaning. This suggests a degree of adaptability on the students’ part to adequately function within the multiple learning contexts which have the potential to hold contested meanings between familiar or practice-based ways of knowing and doing things and academic ways (Lea, 1998; Mezirow, 2000). This implies that students are open to the development of aspects of identity within a range of contexts, which has further implications in specific relation to their developing academic identities. Developing an identity as a student of field-based Early Childhood Initial Teacher Education is a constituent part of becoming academically literate (Lea, 2004; Northedge, 2003), and as such has further implications in relation to associated issues of student engagement retention and success.

This literature review informs a research project for completion of a PhD in Education, to critically examine the academic identity of students in field-based Early Childhood Initial Teacher Education. The study holds relevance for those involved in the wider preparation of students for tertiary education such as curriculum alignment between the compulsory and post compulsory sector and the teacher registration body. Further stakeholders interested in the outcome of the study potentially include early childhood education service providers, policy makers, users and employees, as well as students themselves.

Key Phrases: Professional education; field–based Early Childhood Initial Teacher Education; academic identity; academic literacies.

Introduction

Higher education institutions have become devoted to the production of knowledge bound with professional credentials. The incidental effect being that the acquisition of knowledge has become associated with occupational standards of competency as defined by academic level of qualification. The knowledge of the university, academic knowledge, is thus regarded as that necessary for competent practice within a professional field of practice. Associated with this discussion of professional education and credentialing is the situation of teacher education and in particular that of field-based Early Childhood Initial Teacher Education (ECITE) evident through the promotion of teacher training scholarships (Teach NZ, 2010) and the New Zealand Government strategy statement, Pathways to the Future (Ministry of Education, 2002), in which quality of teaching and service early childhood provision are related to teacher credentials.
The academic identity of field-based ECITE

The increasingly significant place of academia within the dispensing of professional credentialing supports the need to develop a clearer understanding of how students within ECITE relate to the academic aspects of the qualification process. There is no clear sense as to what academic identity looks like within ECITE and how significant it is in terms of the teaching profession within the field of ECE. The persistent perspective that questions the academic ability of those who enter the early childhood profession though may help to understand why this may be a particular issue for those students within ECITE. This is evident in the New Zealand ECITE context as discussed by May (1997) who emphasises the persisting debate as to the ability of early childhood students to manage degree level study evidenced through the pressure being applied to make early childhood credentialing “Not just easier to access” but also to make it a “More lightweight and easier qualification to achieve” (May, 1997, p. 27). This argument is put alongside the conflicting claim that early childhood teacher education has “finally lost its older (and somewhat unfair) image of recruiting the not so bright girls” (May, 1997, p. 21) who moved into early childhood work as it was deemed an easy option (Calder, 2008).

The persistence of such conflicting discourses within field-based ECITE does not appear to support the effective development of academic identity, which has been seen within research into other professions. Rodriguez (2009) in a study of business students found that identity aspects of “Both academic self concept and expectation set the direction for students’ intellectual growth and become motivational drivers that encourage critical thinking” (p. 536). The literature to date appears to lack a detailed investigation into the nature and role of academic identity within ECITE which is significant given the increased academic involvement for purposes of early childhood teacher credentialing and how matters of identity have been specifically related to matters of student success, engagement, and depth of learning (Biggs, 2000; House, 1992; Rodriguez, 2009; Solomonides & Reid, 2009). This may also relate to the historical development of teacher credentialing within early childhood which is regarded as a young academic discipline due to the regarding of early childhood related work as ‘women’s work’ which in turn was not considered as necessitating specialist academic knowledge (Calder, 2008).

The context of field-based Early Childhood Initial Teacher Education in New Zealand Aotearoa

In 2002 the Ministry of Education in New Zealand signalled a desire to increase public participation in quality early childhood education arguing that the outcome of participation in quality early childhood education is equated with children’s future educational achievement. Within the strategic plan, Pathways to the Future (Ministry of Education, 2002), the qualification of early childhood teachers was identified as contributing to the quality of early childhood provision. As such one of the aims of the strategic plan was to ensure that early childhood teacher’s professional qualification became equal to that of schoolteachers. Supportive measures within this process include “the introduction of professional registration requirements, for all teachers in teacher-led ECE services, such as those already applying in the schools sector and kindergartens” (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 3) and “through increasing the numbers of qualified teachers” (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 6). Within such documents discourses of quality can be seen to be associated with those of credentialing, as supported by the more specific claim that “there is a strong correlation between quality ECE and teacher qualifications” (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 6).
The impact of this call for equality of training and practice led to changes in terms of an increase in the academic level of qualification for ECITE. This has sent ripples across the early childhood community with the result that many early childhood teachers moved to retrain or update training to a higher academic level due to the potential risk of losing the positions in which they have worked successfully for many years (Findsen, 2009). As increased levels of qualification have been equated with higher academic levels of study, students entering the realm of field-based ECITE are faced with challenges in terms of academic literacies of which academic identity is associated. The place of academia in providing authority and legitimacy to early childhood education occupational qualification is challenged by student claims that they are not training to be academics (Dunham, 2009). It would appear from such statements that the relevance of academic level within a professional qualification is open to interpretation particularly given that there may be friction between wider perceptions of what it means to be an early childhood teacher according to the various stakeholders involved. This issue is echoed within the wider discourse of the early childhood community. It is noted that parental perspectives again may not, in all cases, correspond with those of Government in terms of what constitutes quality. For example Black (2009) highlights that from parents’ perspectives, “Looking after children well is hard work” (p.94) but that it likewise, “should not be rocket science and should not require a University degree” (Black, 2009, p. 94).

Within field-based ECITE a further challenge is posed due to knowledge and meaning being constructed across a landscape of co-existing structures where sites of learning consist of those other than the main training organisations campus (Kane, 2005). This landscape also incorporates the discourses of the early childhood and teacher education communities, which includes participation from amongst others early childhood providers, policy development and implementation, early childhood service users and training institutions for accreditation for licence to practice. To successfully navigate this landscape the student within field-based ECITE is required to respond reflexively within these varied sites where meaning is constructed. As part of this reflexive process teachers are required to be conversant with and literate in the discourses within and across these communities.

Defining literacy practices

It is argued that part of the process of becoming literate relates to degrees of involvement and participation within a given community (Wenger, 1998). Movement from the periphery to the centre of the community is facilitated through the enhancement of competency in the required discourses and associated literacy practices (Smith, 2009). From this perspective for a student of field-based ECITE this means that typically they participate in a limited way within the community of teachers and teaching as equitable status is not given to all community participants (Northedge, 2003). Experience and accreditation for professional practice support the move into more central and involved forms of participation. This notion of participation as a form of trajectory supports the understanding of learning within credentialing as a process rather than a model of knowledge acquisition.

The participation of students in field-based ECITE across multiple learning contexts is experienced at any one time which according to Wenger (2009) contribute to the formation of a complex landscape of interweaving practices. Within this landscape there is no guarantee that the practices of one community will align with another. For those involved in field-based ECITE a challenge is posed in terms of the alignment of literacy practices across this landscape, which typically involves many parties or stakeholders. The literacy practices of one of the parties involved in field-based ECITE cannot be assumed to align easily with those of other parties. The complexity of alignment of requirements for participation within a community can be seen in terms of the many labels – trainees, volunteers, students, teacher - which may be assigned by and to the various participants of students in field-based ECITE.
By implication these labels assign the levels of participation and value associated with the student (Schultz, 1997). Such labels can position the learner as a commodity or asset which could be argued to relate to the discourse of early childhood education where value is implied through level of qualification and by implication academic literacy practices are given precedence over other possible forms of literacy relevant to the work place.

Discussion of literacy practices is significant as within the discourse of ECITE literacy is regarded as an asset to help support claims of quality through professional credentialing (Eraut, 1994). This argument could be seen to relate to the nature of knowledge within teacher education as there is the related danger of literacy being regarded as a product and quantifiable in terms of time and contact hours in which learning is expected to occur to ensure a literate workforce if “reading and writing are conceptualised as social and constructive processes and learning includes negotiation and collaboration, then it is impossible to put either a clock or a price tag on learning literacy” (Schultz, 1997, p. 65). Equally Graff (1986) regards this reliance on literacy for social growth as “the literacy myth” whereby the claim that a more literate workforce contributes to economic development is argued as an overgeneralization. Scribner and Cole, 1981, suggest that instead the contexts in which literacy practices are utilised should be examined as “Literacy makes some difference to some skills in some contexts” (p.234). Hull argues that literacy discourse may in fact operate as a ‘smokescreen’, which detracts from alternative societal issues and as such literacy and conversely qualification can be regarded as ‘symptomatic of larger ills’ (Hull, 1997, p. 11).

Consideration of academic literacy within the qualification process of early childhood educators is pertinent to the situation within field-based ECITE. Academic literacy for field-based ECITE relates to arguments that a focus on literacy has the potential to miss or undermine the potential of workers themselves, with academic tests not being a suitable measure of workers and job performance (Rogoff & Lave 1984). This perspective is supported by Hull’s (1997) claim that as a multiple construct literacy practices relate to wider issues of power and social and political interest. As Hull argues, “We need to listen with a sceptical ear when blanket pronouncements are made about literacy and its relation to work” (1997, p. 21). Such lines of argument relate to the established work of Freire (1998) who directs attention to the power relations evident in the literacy practices. Literacy is according to Hull regarded “as a curative of problems that literacy alone cannot solve” (1997, p. 11) which puts into question the place of academic qualification to measure workers occupational performance. Hull presents the argument that the literacy level of a person can be inferred according to the status of their occupation.

**Identity as a literacy concern across multiple sites of learning**

For the student within field-based ECITE it is argued that there are multiple identities under construction at the same time, which relate to the varied communities in which they participate. These multiple identities are situated within what Hawkins (2005) refers to as multiple realities and not all may specifically relate to their formal learning but may indirectly impact on it. For example a student within field-based ECITE is not relating to the world solely as a student but may also be taking on the identities of ‘teacher’, colleague, peer, employee, parent, to name but a few. These multiple realities potentially contain differing discourses, which may cause friction and dissonance within the positioning of identities. This is significant for students of field-based ECITE, which as an occupational qualification draws on the blending of theory with practice through the multiple contexts of academic and practicum components. The reality for students within field-based ECITE is that the multiple discourses of the specialised discipline knowledge base, policy, occupational practice and the public domain are likely to be contested.
Field-based learning requires students to engage in multiple discourses, which may place importance on different legitimating structures. Northedge (2003) talks about the need for students to navigate their way through the learning environment, which is made up of various discourses all of which may have different governing rules depending on the site in which they are located. The ‘who am I’ involved in identity construction is challenged by the complex discourses of the wider external environments. The result being experienced as a struggle when new ways of knowing, understanding, interpreting and organising knowledge contest with those on which ones life history have been based to date (Lea & Street, 1998; Hawkins, 2005). Prior experiences are said to act as filters through which new ways of knowing and being are developed which may result in an “intellectual anxiety attack” when a sense of fit between the self as a learner and the demands of the external learning community do not align (Brookfield, 2006, p. 90).

The compatibility of academic knowledge to the work context is confronted further when those other than course lecturers are turned to for support in delivering the practical components of the field-based ECITE programmes it is not only the student’s academic identity which is being brought into the assessment and competency arena but also that of mentor teacher who whilst highly skilled in terms of practice and credential may still be challenged by the academically directed discourse. So it can therefore be seen that the academic identity of the student is not developing or operating in isolation from the academic identity of others across the landscape of multiple communities of practice in which they are engaging.

As developing a self-identity requires acceptance and validation from the external community to which it is related it is not a one way process that flows from out from the person (Hawkins, 2005). This argument is further supported by Wenger who claims that identity is not just about what others think of us but is also about our ability to participate and be active in the construction of identity. In terms of the academic learning environment this implies that it is not solely the student’s perspective of themself as a learner but also the external validation of this from the learning community, which contributes to the formation of learner identity. Burnett (2006) talks of the self as becoming ‘edited’ to form a better fit with the identities within any given community. This editing can be an active and ongoing process as what “the narratives, categories, roles, and positions come to mean as an experience of participation is something that must be worked out in practice” (Wenger, 1998, p. 151). Rather than learning as being externally imposed onto a person this approach locates learning internally (Askew & Carnell, 1998). In saying this learning is not being regarded as an individual enterprise rather that it comes about through the communication and relationships that occur through the social processes where meaning is constructed and reconstructed with processes of learning and the self as a learner being embedded within wider social practices (Lea, 1998).

Within adult education theory it is suggested that the process of learning for adults involves the desire to seek personal changes within the learner’s sense of self (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997). This notion draws on concepts of autonomy in terms of adult as agents of their own learning which is achieved through self awareness, empowerment in making choices about associated needs, and a sense of active involvement in one’s learning as opposed to being a passive recipient (Boud, 1989). Autonomy in the context of adult education draws on notions of independence, self direction, with the learner regarded as being able to construct their own rules for learning choosing what is valued in the learning process and the norms that will be respected (Chene, 1983). It would be possible to question this theoretical construct of the adult learner and the degree to which these acts of autonomy relate the reality of the adult learner experience. Indeed Boud (1989) describes in detail the differing ways in which autonomy can be interpreted and actioned.
In terms of students undergoing field-based ECITE it could be argued that this autonomy is in fact assumed and indeed there are in turn many restraints on such adult learners within these programmes. Such assumptions could be investigated through the varied contexts in which adult learning occurs, namely the pedagogical context, the teaching-learning relationship and actual learning activities as well as the underlying motivations to engage in the learning context (Chene, 2003). Adult learners engaged in formal occupational training programmes may well continue to find that the norms of practices of learning are set within the bounds of competency components and what is deemed as valuable knowledge as set by academics. The topics selected for delivery within courses within teacher education programmes are predetermined and designed separately from the learner. Assessment tools and criteria are often set and whilst may go as far as involving students in their self-assessment via a percentage of the grading criteria these criteria themselves are largely set aside by course lecturers and designers.

Relevance and worth

Credentialing for practice within the field of early childhood education has become more complex given the discourses in which it is embedded. Such discourses cover questions of: professional status; higher education; professional education; economics, health and social participation (May, 2002; Woodrow, 2007). Early childhood teacher credentialing continues to be buffeted and repositioned in terms of value and significance. This continual repositioning holds significance for those students of ECITE both in terms of the value of the challenge of higher academic levels of credentials and in terms of social standing as professionals.

Gaining a professional ECITE credential involves participation not only in discipline related discourses but also participation in academic discourses. Professional literacies and academic literacies are therefore required, of which matters of identity are included. Exploring aspects of identity, who I am, as an academic learner and as a professional becomes an integral part of the process of ECITE (Graham & Phelps, 2003). Academic identity therefore is integral to academic literacies and as such has implications for student engagement, participation, retention and success. Implications that are of significance to providers and students of ECITE, early childhood service providers, users and employees as well as early childhood related policy makers. Specific study of the academic identity and credentialing for students in ECITE is as yet unexplored and whilst there is research into aspects relating to academic identity for students of other disciplines there is no evidence to suggest that this data can be generalised to the complex situation within the multiple contexts of learning for field-based ECITE.

Understanding the academic identity development of students in relation to ECITE and in relation to a professional identity would provide insight into the wider tensions of becoming an early childhood teacher within the shifting contexts of New Zealand and how this process can be best supported. In light of this the aim of this research project is to investigate the nature and implication of tensions in relation to the development of academic identity of students in ECITE. Once the significance of academic identity for students in field-based ECITE is established there will be opportunity to use this information to potentially inform curriculum alignment, programme development and policy associated with the credentialing of early childhood teachers.

REFERENCES
Black, J. (2009, July 4-10). To a ridiculous degree. *New Zealand Listener*, 3608(13555), 94.


