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Research

Tertiary teaching: Reflecting on human change and influence from the crucible

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This article draws on the metaphor of ‘a crucible’ to describe the tertiary classroom context, where I work in initial teacher education with early childhood education (ECE) student teachers. Stories are told about the classroom participants (students and an educator) in an attempt to find meaning in terms of development, both the students and mine. This storytelling highlights ongoing questions for me about the impact of what happens in the classroom we bring our selves to, and the significance of informed actions for social justice for teachers and teaching. In telling these stories I highlight my deepening understanding of education pedagogy, and perception of myself as a teacher, a practitioner of human influence and change. I hope that these stories echo and illuminate the experiences of other educators as they too seek to understand their practice.

Introduction

Edwards (2003) uses the metaphor of 'a crucible' to argue the central role of the socio-cultural context *for*, rather than influence *on*, children's development from a socio-cultural perspective (p.259). In this article, I borrow this metaphor and associated ideas in relation to the development of student teachers in initial teacher education. In Roget's Thesaurus (Editors of the American Heritage Dictionary, 1995) 'crucible' is described as: conversion, alchemy, transformation, regeneration, melting pot, alembic, cauldron, heater, testing agent whereas in the Encarta Dictionary (Microsoft Corporation, 2009) descriptions include: a container for melting something; the bottom of a furnace; testing circumstances; or an ordeal. All of these concepts suggest change and testing circumstances. They resonate with my current thinking about teacher preparation in tertiary education and my role as "a practitioner of human change and influence" in the words of the late Poh Chung (Nancy) Kung (Bone, 2008). Hence, the crucible is the classroom where I teach; the place or set of circumstances where people or things are subjected to forces that test them and often make them change.

The notion of socio and cultural context(s) as the crucible for development relates to the work of Vygotsky (Edwards, 2003) and reinforces the significance of relationships in the classroom. As student teachers develop into practising teachers, their individual and collective identities, their thinking, their sense of agency and, their actions are all being shaped to some degree by the relationships that occur therein. Some of the key forces in the classrooms where I teach, that relate to this development are: my education

philosophy and teaching pedagogies, other students, and New Zealand's bi-cultural ECE curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education [MoE], 1996). In *Te Whāriki*, as in my philosophy of education, "the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning and reciprocal and responsive relationships with people, places and things" (MoE, 1996, p.9) are foregrounded and curriculum is seen as "the sum total of experiences, activities and events, whether direct or indirect which occur within an environment designed to foster (children's) learning and development" (MoE, 1996, p.10).

Waikato, New Zealand

The partnership that exists locally in the Waikato and nationally in New Zealand (or Aotearoa as it is known in the Māori language) between Māori and Pakeha (a Māori loan word meaning non-Māori or white New Zealanders of European descent) derives from the founding document of New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi, signed between the settlers and Māori people in 1840. This spirit of partnership lies at the heart of the New Zealand early childhood education curriculum *Te Whāriki*, the only bi-cultural curriculum in New Zealand/Aotearoa (MoE, 1996).

This partnership is also given expression at the university where I work as a teacher educator. The university is situated on land that was likely confiscated in 1864, and returned to the local people, the Waikato-Tainui Māori tribe, by the government as part of the Treaty of Waitangi claims settlement process, in 1995. The University of Waikato is the only university in New Zealand with Māori as an integral part of its title and its motto affirms the importance of people. There the

university challenges itself to live up to its motto, and to the unique position it occupies in, of, and for things Māori (Roa, n.d, p.1). Every staff member and graduate of the University of Waikato is challenged “to gain an understanding of things Māori, encouraging that bi-cultural foundation in leadership which in turn leads to the multi-cultural astuteness so encouraged today in international fora” (p.5). Hence my responsibility, to students and to the wider community, is to uphold the university’s motto and contribute to developing cultural understandings through my teacher education and academic roles.

Throughout this article many Māori words appear in the text. This phenomenon of borrowing words from the indigenous Māori language in New Zealand is in part related to the recognition of Māori (or Te Reo Māori) as an official language of New Zealand in 1987 according to Daly (2007). The incidence of these borrowings or loan words is changing the face of everyday English language in this country. Macalister (2006) estimated that most New Zealanders have a passive knowledge of 70-80 such words. Many of these words have become part of the everyday lexicon of both white and other non indigenous New Zealanders, hence their use in this article.

The classroom

As participants in real and virtual classrooms, lecturers and students alike bring with them knowledge, ideas and values from other important past and present contexts in their lives. In this place, this melting pot, ways of understanding education and possibilities for teaching and learning are generated as ideas are exchanged.

One of the key roles of teacher educators in 21st century New Zealand is to encourage student teachers to be reflective, reflexive, and critical thinkers (O’Connor & Diggins, 2002; NZ Teachers Council, 2007). These and other attributes, skills, and dispositions will support and empower them to be influential change agents in their classrooms and communities. In my quest to influence social change, I often reflect on questions such as how have I sought to develop these characteristics, this identity of or recognition by students that education is a social and political act (Freire, 1993) during my short career in tertiary education?

Social justice is one of the enduring understandings that teaching staff expect students to have at the end of their ECE degree programme at the University of Waikato. As I teach I am also conscious of wanting to interrupt and replace discourses that continue to be shaped by the 1990s, a decade of radical structural change. My thinking is consistent with Kelsey (1995) who argues that,

... what were once basic priorities – collective responsibility, redistribution of resources and power, social stability, democratic participation and the belief that human beings were entitled to live and work in security and dignity - seemed to have been left far behind (p.350).

In order to promote notions of collective responsibility, equity and democratic participation among students, I draw heavily on my experiences, sharing them as stories with student teachers. These stories are about my teachers’ and other role models, my teaching in ECE and tertiary settings, observations of others’ teaching in classrooms and beyond, my

personal and professional reading, and life experiences. I consciously seek out and share narratives of teachers and students extending their learning beyond the classroom in ways that reflect a concern for the 'greater good'. I try to highlight these examples in order that students will come to understand that teaching is a political act, and that they will soon have a responsibility, as I do, to "assist ākonga (the Māori, or indigenous New Zealand word for learners chosen to represent education settings from early childhood to tertiary and beyond) to think critically about information and ideas and to reflect on their learning" (NZ Teachers Council, 2009, p.1).

Students engage with significant social, political, economic and cultural issues through readings provided, discussion topics, scenarios posed and role-plays. My questions and challenges, and those of students themselves, which accompany these activities, are often deliberately provocative and controversial. They are aimed at developing students' critical thinking based on multiple perspectives and possibilities. Through these culturally and socially mediated processes, students are encouraged to analyse ideas and practices often taken for granted while looking out for, and being mindful of, Western and indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world. They are also assisted to identify dominant discourses along with marginalised groups and to hear silences alongside what is being said. Recognising what is being foregrounded and valued or omitted in what they read, see and hear around them is another skill in their developing toolkit of social and political literacy. These teaching strategies can be seen as testing agents, added to the crucible, the

classroom melting pot, especially if they challenge students' personal, cultural or religious beliefs.

The students

The historical and socio-cultural contexts of the students are many and varied. They exist beyond the classroom, the university and ECE. The students in my classrooms are predominantly female, Pakeha New Zealanders who generally have been raised, and continue to live, in one of two rural cities, Hamilton and Tauranga and their environs. These students are either school leavers or adults and this is generally their first experience of tertiary education. Many are employed part-time in ECE settings and/or are placed in ECE settings on Placement and Practicum (one day a week for several weeks or 4-7 weeks continuous teaching experience) under the guidance of an experienced (Associate) teacher.

Students' experiences in ECE settings provide them with much information to process as well as opportunities to think "critically and reflectively about their (and others') daily actions of teaching" (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009, p. 314). Fellow students are also forces, which test them and may make them change, in the classroom and beyond. The classroom is the place to which students bring their observations, perspectives, questions, arguments and reflections from their lives outside the university. Here in tutorials and on-line discussions, students are encouraged to dialogue and participate responsively. They are also urged to know themselves; their culture, values and beliefs and convictions. Beyond the classroom they spend time together, on and off campus, unpacking or debriefing about the testing

circumstances or ordeals of the university classrooms, ECE settings and their lives.

These observations of the student population are relevant to this discussion, and the stories contained herein, because these characteristics and experiences, albeit perceived ones on my part, are factors in the sociocultural context, in which I teach, student teachers are studying, and we are all developing.

Myself/ my selves

The self/selves that I bring to teaching is/are best explained by telling my stories. I am the third of seven children in a Catholic family of Irish descent. As a child I was taught by nuns and observed my parents taking active roles in various church committees both locally and nationally. 'Social justice' is a strong tenet throughout much Catholic doctrine and education. Hence, I see that my ongoing commitment to it can be traced back to my family of origin, and their religion. Not surprisingly during my teacher training in the late seventies I was involved in university student politics. Following graduation I actively participated in anti-Springbok tour protests, feminist writing workshops, homosexual law reform protests, organisations such as 'Pakeha women debate the Treaty', and other political activities centred on women, unions and ECE.

A social science degree majoring in politics and labour studies, and fifteen years spent working as a union official, mostly in education unions, honed my political activism. The completion of a Masters in Education degree led me to my current role as a teacher educator back on the campus where I did my initial teacher training. Along the way I have also found 'recovery' and become

interested in everyday spirituality as part of my daily life and pedagogical practice (Bone, 2007).

Whilst particular historical and social contexts have shaped my thinking and my identity as a teacher, these generally have not been shared by the students I teach. Few of the students in my classes are over 45 years of age and the political, social, economic and environmental landscape has changed considerably since the 1980s as discussed earlier. With my background and Kelsey's (1995) analysis in mind, I see my role as a teacher educator, being to regenerate these basic priorities particularly social justice, collective responsibility and democratic participation. These ideas are shared by many influential international writers in the field of ECE (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1993; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Dau, 2001; Derman-Sparks & the ABC Taskforce, 1989; Derman-Sparks, 2008; and MacNaughton, 2003).

My pedagogy

Holding the power and stirring the cauldron as I teach, I am conscious that I foreground what I value, a strong sense of social justice and agency fuelled by social and political literacy. I utilise a range of general and specialist teaching strategies and techniques consistent with my developing philosophy of adult education and my values and beliefs (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009). Often this involves the students and I working collaboratively, sharing stories, questioning and problem posing. I observe closely to see if there are visible signs of change, conversion or transformation among the students. What evidence is there of "praxis: reflection and action on the world in order to transform

it" (Freire, 1993, p.33), or action resulting from the marrying together of theory and practice? Has informed action been visible as a result of these forces that students have been subjected to? What has happened in the context of the classroom or beyond that shows the impact/ effect of this exposure? Have these sets of circumstances in some way, been responsible for making them develop/change/act? It seems that there are more questions than answers in this complex business of pedagogy with "social justice intent" (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009, p.314).

As a teacher, I try to model empowerment that involves critically questioning what happens in ECE centres (classrooms) in terms of the values and the culture that are being upheld. I argue, in the words of MacNaughton and Williams (2009), that if we are unwilling to "accept the inequalities of our society along lines of race, class, gender and ability" (p.315) then we must confront real problems that occur in our daily lives through informed action. I wholeheartedly endorse their argument that "teachers work for empowerment... by reflecting critically on the social consequences of what they teach (and) this requires recognition that all education, including early childhood education, is a social and political act and that knowledge is socially constructed" (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009, p.314).

Robinson and Jones-Diaz (2000) argue that, "children's understanding of and practices towards diversity are constituted within the various discourses that are available to them in their daily lives" (cited in Robinson, 2002, p.416). They believe that children can understand sexual diversity and difference as part of

social diversity, through discourses that teachers make available to them in early childhood education settings. I believe that this applies equally to student teachers so I continue to look for multiple ways to make available alternative discourses about gender, sexuality and race, through the provision of resources such as post modern children's picture books (O'Neill, 2010), seminal readings concerned with social justice, anti-bias (Derman-Sparks et al., 1989; Derman-Sparks, 2008) and diversity and difference from post structural perspectives from writers such as Robinson, MacNaughton and others from the Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC) for example.

These ideas hopefully influence students' developing philosophies of teaching which are central to the professional practice papers I teach, linked to their Practicum. In the second year of the degree the focus is on reflective and reflexive teaching practice while in the third year notions of democracy, advocacy and agency are explored in relation to philosophy and education. Throughout these two papers students are encouraged to develop a critical self-reflexive stance based on constant interweaving of theory and practice and constant change.

From time to time incidents occur that cause me to consider, and reconsider, the effectiveness of my pedagogy, and the development of students in the classroom. While there is no observable or causal relationship between the classroom, my teaching and the actions of students outlined in the next two stories, their commendable actions made

me proud. These incidents appear to be about social justice: the redistribution of resources, equity and collective responsibility. In my mind, students' meaningful and worthwhile actions are an affirmation of my teaching pedagogy and I tell these stories in order to reflect on them and their meaning.

Farewell presents of a different kind:

At the end of the academic year, at their farewell party, the graduating students presented their lecturers with individual handmade thank you cards that contained a personalised message from each student. The cards were not accompanied by the traditional obligatory gifts of wine or chocolates. Instead, in lieu of a present, each of our cards contained a photocopied receipt from Women's Refuge (www.womensrefuge.org.nz). The message read:

"To the ECE teaching team. The third year students of 2009 would like to thank you for all the knowledge, wisdom and support we received throughout our degree. A donation of \$400 has been made to Women's Refuge on your behalf" (Personal communication, 22 October, 2009).

I was left to wonder if this action had its genesis in our classroom where we spent many hours engaged in processes designed to develop us into teachers; tertiary and ECE teachers "with a social justice intent" (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009, p.314). In some small way, had my pedagogy been a factor contributing to this action?

Gifts across the sea:

Meanwhile, the second year students that I had taught for Professional Practice donated gifts to the *Samaritans Purse Annual Operation Christmas Child Appeal*

(<http://www.samaritanspurse.org/index.php/OCC/>).

This project was initiated by one of the students who encountered the appeal at an ECE centre where she was on 'teaching experience'. She initially took the shoebox home to fill herself but told me that as an afterthought she decided to get the class involved. Students each made an individual donation in line with the six suggestions: something to love; something special; some things for school; something to play with; something to wear and something for personal hygiene, for 2-4 year old girls and boys. Their gifts filled three shoeboxes and were destined for 'needy' children in Fiji and other Pacific Islands (Personal communication, 19 November, 2009).

Whilst these projects were initiated by one or a small group of students, it appears that their classmates joined in the projects enthusiastically. These suggestions were likely to have been negotiated in the classroom setting. I wonder if some students contested or resisted the extra-mural class actions in the examples discussed. Or if any of them contested the idea of 'battered women' and the notion of supporting them, or questioned the appeal for 'needy' children in Fiji and other Pacific Islands rather than in New Zealand where many children also live in poverty? The underlying issues that lead to violence against women and children, and people living in poverty also deserve our attention, in the classroom and beyond.

Initially I saw these two stories representing praxis (Freire, 1993), teachers taking informed action for social justice, or "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p.33).

However, under a 'critical lens' these students' actions could be seen as one-off actions based on altruistic motives, or missionary-type activities abroad rather than at home, that will not substantially change or transform the lives of those women and children in need. Other stories are needed to identify resistance or 'shifts' that occurred for students in the classroom (and beyond) where they were tested and sought to effect change.

Advocacy, agency and the arts

Preparation for their role as advocates for young children and their families can happen for student teachers in the classroom, and on teaching practice (Practicum). It can begin with small, but important, issues like a child's right to determine their own play or children's access to resources. In an arts-based research study I undertook with a colleague (see Kelly & Jurisich, 2010) with the same cohort of students, several participants clearly described an awareness of their 'agency', advocacy role and children's rights. These student teachers confidently advocated for children's rights to make choices, to explore, and to express themselves through the arts, even when it meant going against what experienced teachers were proposing or when doing so was risking censure. Pseudonyms have replaced real names.

Tammy recounted:

One of the teachers said "you should be painting on the paper not your hands" and I thought that's not necessarily the case, because of the module and what I have learnt, so I said, "How about we leave him and see what he does". Well he literally painted every exposed piece of skin that he had, his face, his hands, his feet were purple. He felt absolutely fantastic about

it, to the point that even his eye lids were purple. It was harmless and he had a great time. He walked around like that all day and even his mother was proud of him when she picked him up. He was empowered and learning in a different way instead of just painting on paper.

Whereas Nat had this to say:

In a centre where things are very restricted, I find myself getting a whole lot of paper out and leaving it there, or I take the paints outside. I've been told off a few times but I don't care. I think that if they have one meaningful activity, that they are actually having fun with, me being told off doesn't matter... I believe I just need to do things for the children. I am developing understandings about my own personal philosophy.

What was so 'bad' about feminism? Or who is testing who now?

Another story also points to students developing understandings about the match (or mismatch) between personal values, teaching philosophies and prospective employment. One day before class a student questioned me about feminism and what was so bad about it. Her question, asked in past tense, implied that feminism was a historical phenomenon no longer present in society today. This positioning surprised me given that, during our classes, I had been as open about my 'left wing feminist' views as she had been about herself as a 'fundamentalist Christian'. I understood, and named, her questioning as based on a judgement of feminism. I suggested that people who judged feminism, and as a consequence feminists, as 'bad' were likely to be commenting on the 'radical' stance taken by early feminists on a woman's right to choose in terms of contraception, sterilisation and abortion. I

also suggested that those who saw feminism as 'bad' probably shared her 'Right to life' stance as evidenced by the tiny silver feet badge she was wearing that day.

It is unlikely as a result of our subsequent discussion that any shifts occurred in her thinking in this controversial matter. In hindsight I wish I had posed questions for her about why she thought feminists were being constructed in this light rather than rushing to answer the question she posed. On reflection I also wonder if she was being deliberately provocative and testing me as I so often tested students with scenarios and course material designed to provoke critical thinking, broaden their perspectives and stimulate debate.

Shifts related to philosophy, curricula, resources and ideas

Examination of values-based education and anti-bias curriculum (Derman Sparks et al., 1989), and related class discussions both face-to-face and on-line, helped many students to clarify their thinking in relation to diversity and difference, and relevant philosophy and curricula. We all developed an awareness of our cultural arrogance, assumptions and behaviours based on our lack of cultural consciousness, or internalised racism, through hearing and telling stories related to our experiences as well as through stories like 'turtle hunting' (Fasoli, in Dau, 1999) and the 'social worker on a home visit' scenario from Bolton's story-based practice (Bolton, 2001). Deeply felt, often unconscious and previously unexplored assumptions were sometimes challenged by these and other stories. Sometimes the only way I knew this to be the case was because of private

conversations I had with students or emails they sent me outside of class.

A tour of social justice websites that involved students introducing each other to different sites, and posing a question for others to answer about their nominated website opened up a virtual world of information and examples of activism for students to consider. An improved ability by some students to critique what they read in media was also noted. Based on our use of media clippings in class, practise, role modelling and encouragement they began to look critically at the messages (and bias often inherent in them) in newspapers and reports.

Another provocation came with their introduction to 'the child's questions' in relation to assessment and *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand (NZ) ECE curriculum. The questions: "Can I trust you? Do you know me? Do you hear me? Do you let me fly? Is this place fair for us?" (Carr, May, Podmore, Cubey, Hatherly & Macartney, 2000) all caused students to see the child, the overt and hidden curriculum, and the setting, from the child's perspective as evidenced by entries in their reflective journals and reflections on Practicum.

A series of children's picture books featuring same-sex couples and same sex headed families were also used informally with students, as they are with young children to develop in a growing number of education settings (Gunn, 2006; The No Outsiders Project, 2008). The books, and an on-line discussion featuring a related scenario, challenged many students to confront their homophobia and the dominant discourse of heteronormativity for the first time. A

number of students realised that their religious beliefs or ethnic values should not get in the way of the education/care they give to children (Clay, 2004; Burt & Klinger Lesser, 2008) and that a child is harmed when their family is rendered invisible or treated differently to others. However, not everyone was willing to engage with these ideas or accept these propositions.

Shifts also occurred in students' thinking around educational philosophy as they had practical experience as students or untrained teachers working part-time in ECE centres. Their emergent philosophies of teaching, that they were being asked to articulate in class, and in assignments, were constantly being challenged and modified. A number of students identified in their writing that centres needed to be places where there was a culture of reflexivity and reflection if teachers were to be active in challenging oppression and prejudice. Also noteworthy was the realisation by some students, but not all, of the contestability of ideas and concepts as opposed to their previously unexplored views, for example 'inclusion' or 'gender' or the existence of 'isms' such as heterosexism and classism or concepts such as 'heteronormativity' (Gunn, 2008).

Meanwhile, an ECE centre manager/prospective employer running a session on gaining employment told students that they needed to leave their personal beliefs at the door and adhere to the centre philosophy and their curriculum obligations at all times regardless of their personal values and beliefs. Not everyone agreed with this position. Unsurprisingly, the questioning student from the previous story told us that she was looking to work in a Christian ECE centre in order to be

certain of a match between her beliefs and the centre's philosophy.

Resistance from students

Resistance to the ideas presented in these modules was evident where the professional obligations of teachers/student teachers conflicted with their personal values and beliefs. As teacher educators we meet resistance on a number of fronts depending on the cohort of students. This cohort, who had a significant number of students who identified as Christian, clearly found homosexuality difficult. Understanding that the challenge to see children and their families in culturally complex ways and not confined to culture related to ethnicity was a problem for some students.

This pedagogical obligation that applies to teachers is widespread in early childhood education through curriculum documents, codes of ethics and other regulatory standards and expectations in New Zealand and Australia (MoE, 1996; New Zealand Teachers Council, 2009; Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008). Whilst students understood that it related to the diversity of cultures among families in ECE settings or to deafness or disability for example, recognition of diversity and difference relating to gender and sexuality was often harder to comprehend and not often provided for in students' practical experiences in ECE settings.

Some students felt uncomfortable discussing social diversity and sexuality even where the book was a true story about a family of penguins at Central Park Zoo in New York: *And Tango makes three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005). In an on-

line discussion one student argued that it was not the children's fault that their mothers (parents) are like that. Whereas many others were unsurprised to hear that this book, considered 'innocuous' by me and others (Gunn, 2006), was on the American Library Association's list of Top Ten most frequently challenged books (NB: A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials available in libraries based on the objections of a person or group).

There was both acceptance and resistance among the cohort of students to seeing that 'the world is not black and white', that multiple perspectives and possibilities can and do co-exist in our contemporary global world and that as teachers and educators we need to take an activist stance to countering narrow ways of thinking and understanding about the worlds we live and work in. Resistance was sometimes evident when students were encouraged to unpack their assumptions or to embrace uncertainty. Other occasions included when we explored binaries and dualisms like the bad/ good positioning of feminists in the earlier story; the continuum of sexuality as opposed to 'straight' and 'gay'; or how the unchallenged pervasive gender stereotypes in Disney movies may have served to limit our thinking, and behaviour, and that of children's today. These and other provocations met with varying responses from students at the time and afterwards as they continued to process what they heard and read in the following weeks.

Reflections from a teacher

Students do not always verbalise their resistance in face-to-face classes or on-line forums. I have a strong sense that 'political correctness' pervades students'

writing and discussions. This saying what lecturers want to hear is likely to be related to a fear of failing if they honestly express contrary views. In our institution the two issues that are likely to fall into this category relate to 'otherness' in terms of sexuality and biculturalism, in my view. Likewise, students do not always embrace biculturalism and associated ideas about self determination, power sharing, partnership and equity, despite our best intentions, university motto and bi-cultural curriculum. Whilst I am committed to these principles and continually explore ways to enact them in classrooms and through my teaching, I am mindful that this is an ongoing journey for us all.

Anecdotal reports suggest that controversial issues from class often spilled over or were revisited in social settings, outside of class, such as the cafe. According to students much discussion and debate occurs outside of class in relation to things said in class or on-line by other students and lecturers. Sometimes lecturers are alerted to these discussions as students seek to continue them in the classroom. Spaces can open up in the classroom where resistances can be explored, as students challenge themselves and others, and shifts can occur although the theory of these practices is more common than the reality in my classroom.

On reflection, I note that there are few formal or organised opportunities currently available to students, during their university study, to engage in actions that build on our class 'talk' by addressing structural inequalities either locally or globally. Nevertheless as Derman-Sparks (2008) notes "there are always new paths to explore ... (and) deeper understandings

to have” (p.12). Despite this lack of formal opportunity, by the end of their studies a number of students were active in student union activities, became members of the teachers union NZEI Te Riu Roa and/or OMEP the international early childhood education organisation or had been involved in advocacy within ECE, as a new government began dismantling gains of the past. The activism included signing petitions and writing letters to editor, as well as working as volunteers with refugee children and their families. These actions can all be seen to be related to course content in various modules and to activism role modelled by lecturers and encouragement given to students recognising their agency and to get involved.

It is important to me that I keep expressing views that provide/ provoke multiple perspectives. I am continually engaged in reading and talking to academics/ educators about how to interrupt dominant discourses with students in ways that do not get their backs up or cause them to disengage from discussions and debate around controversial topics. Finding appropriate readings and scenarios as well as developing specific strategies and activities to meet these objectives is my ongoing assignment.

My preparedness to share my strong views and beliefs, particularly if I think they might interrupt views’ students hold, is both a strength and a weakness in my teaching. Whilst I can be a powerful role model, I am also conscious that my passions, opinions and beliefs often dominate classes where, in an assessment focussed culture, I hold the power to fail students. Conversely, my openness and willingness to tell ‘real’

stories, often related to my mistakes, ‘faux pas’ and sometimes unethical behaviour when I was an ECE teacher, is the issue most often commented on by students as one of my strengths in feedback and appraisals.

Conclusion

As teacher educators committed to making a difference, how can we ever be sure that our teaching has prepared teachers with the necessary social and political literacy to teach young children in ECE settings in the twenty-first century...or to meet the Graduating Teacher Standards (NZ Teachers Council, 2007)? Or that students’ beliefs about, and actions towards, social justice will be sustained beyond the university?

Despite this lack of certainty of outcomes, I know that what happens in the classroom context, and beyond (as a result of teaching and learning in the classroom and other university contexts – the library and the cafe) affects all of us because of the relationships we build there, the encounters we have with our selves, each other, ideas, and the dialectic relationship between theory and practice. It is the stories we tell, and interrupt, and retell that help us make sense of all that goes on in our socio-cultural contexts, and the relationships between them that impact on children and adults alike. Our individual and collective identities, thinking, sense of agency and actions are all being shaped by our relationships with people, places and things (MoE, 1996).

Writing this article has raised several questions for further study. What factors contribute to some students changing more than others? Is it their age, background, ethnicity, experiences of

diversity, or oppression and prejudice along with their willingness to engage in dialogue and debate? Baseline information collected prior to the modules, excerpts from assignments and/or semi structured interviews with students after the completion of these modules could shed further light on this question. In this instance I did not formally interview students before they graduated but have since sought and received written approval from specific students to include excerpts, personal communication and details of our discussions in this paper. Another issue deserving of further study in terms of informing tertiary teaching for social justice relates to the likelihood (or otherwise) of students beliefs and action being maintained beyond graduation and into their teaching long term. How likely is “a political, activist approach to the education of young children” (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009, p. 409) introduced at university, to be found in beginning and experienced teachers? And to what do these teachers attribute this approach and the fact that it has endured?

All of the stories shared in this article confirm the direction my thinking is taking, that student teachers can be empowered to take informed action related to the pedagogy of the classroom but as Derman-Sparks (2008) points out in the words of Horton and Freire (1990) “We make the road by walking[and] there are always new paths to explore and new knowledge to acquire as we engage with new children, families and colleagues, always in changing social conditions” (p.12). I am just one of the forces that students are subjected to in their lives at university, in their families and communities. Nevertheless, I have much power and influence in my role as a

teacher, a practitioner of human influence, to help students say their own words to name the world, and to change it.

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