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Using Froebelian teacher narratives in early years teacher training in England

History, identity and reflective practice

Kristen Nawrotzki

Can historical narratives of Froebel-trained teachers increase students’ professional awareness and help them to engage in more critical reflection on their practice? Can such narratives help to reintroduce an explicitly Froebelian element into teacher training where there currently is none? Based upon these research questions, the project set out to assess the potential of self-designed curricular materials to improve the awareness and reflective practice of trainee teachers (especially those with a focus on early years). It was intended to test the waters for a larger project about the use of narratives, biography and autobiography in understanding and undertaking Froebelian education in the past and present.

Both historical awareness (Bethel, 1999; DePaepe, 1983; Jordaan, 1995; Preskill and Jacobvitz, 2001) and reflective practice (Russo and Ford, 2006; Schön, 1987; Sumson and Fleet, 1996) are key parts of the development of teachers’ professional identities. According to the Teacher Training Authority, in order to attain Qualified Teacher Status, all teacher trainees must be “able to improve their own teaching, by evaluating it, learning from the effective practice of others and from evidence” (TDAS, 2006a). Furthermore, trainees must demonstrate “skills in sharing and discussing their own practice and that of colleagues” (TDAS, 2006b). Whilst reflective practice has garnered a great deal of attention in initial teacher training (ITT) and career development programmes, the historical component of educational studies has declined significantly in recent years (Richardson, 1999 and 1999b, McCulloch and Richardson, 2000). Nearly all early years teacher-training textbooks and many articles in early years professional journals include brief historical overviews, but these are by their very nature superficial and fail to make readers aware of the realities involved – whether practical or political – in the development of their profession across time and space. They often focus on ‘big named’ educationalists and rarely differentiate between the theories those ‘big names’ propounded and the ways said theories played out (or did not) in practice. This project sought to reintroduce some of the historical foundations of Froebelian education to trainee teachers in a form which is both practical and relevant to their work and which models forms of reflective practice and critical analysis.

The basis of reflective practice is the idea that learning is constructive – that is, teachers (and others) make plans and take actions based on past experiences. The better they are able to
understand their experiences, the more likely they are to plan and act effectively in the future. This involves a close examination and analysis of intentions and actions as well as of affective responses. Both Friedrich Froebel (1887) and John Dewey (1997) can be seen as proponents of reflective practice (Rodgers, 2002; Black, 2001). There are many different definitions of reflection, including descriptions of various stages and steps for reflection and delineation of requisite and sufficient circumstances (Cortazzi, 2002; Russo and Ford, 2006; Zeichner and Liston, 1987).

Autobiography and narrative are accepted as very important components of reflective practice (Brookfield, 1995), and these are especially fruitful when teachers expose the thinking processes and emotions behind their coping with problems or otherwise puzzling or challenging situations (Loughran, 2002). The most reflective (and productive) narratives are those which openly address one’s own weaknesses. Only recently have researchers begun to explore how teachers actually reflect as part of their work; as Russo and Ford explain, ‘how reflection is enacted by teachers in day-to-day work has not been examined from the teacher’s perspective’ (2006: np).

This project’s combination of historical awareness and a focus on reflective practice fit best-practice models of the latter, in which ‘[r]eflection is not something independent of what students are otherwise expected to learn and reflective practices are not separate from the normal teaching and learning practices of a course’ (Boud and Knights, 1996: 24). Research has found that reading reflective teacher narratives can serve as ‘critical instruments’ fostering both self-reflection and social critique ‘by illuminating the ideologies and material conditions that shape education and by reclaiming teacher knowledge/agency from traditional, top-down educational hierarchies’ (Gallagher, 2002: 32). And whilst more recent teacher narratives, collectively known as ‘teacher’s stories and stories of teachers’ (especially Vivian Gussin Paley’s White Teacher (1979) and Sylvia Ashton-Warner’s Teacher (1963)) have become widely used in ITT, the historical context is rarely if ever given much attention alongside the focus on reflective practice and affective response (Clandinin and Connelly, 1996; Rasberry, 1996; Wiltz and Fein, 1996; Owens and Williams, 1997; Carter, 1993; Johnson, 2001). This is especially true when it comes to making meaning of classroom practices (Smyth, 1989).

This project tested the introduction of the historical component in the form of excerpts from three texts: Kate Douglas Wiggin’s The Story of Patsy; a Reminiscence (1883); Kate Douglas Wiggins My Garden of Memory (1929) and Lileen Hardy’s The Diary of a Free Kindergartner (1917). These narratives (the first semi-autobiographical, the last two fully autobiographical), were written by Froebelian-trained kindergartners working with poor children in San Francisco and Edinburgh (respectively). Unlike most other printed sources on the kindergarten in past times, these give meaningful, reflective insight into both the successes and the struggles these women encountered in their interactions with children, with parents, and with other educators – in their particular social, cultural and historical context. Whilst we must be wary of assuming that these (or any other) teacher narratives capture reality, they may certainly be used as primary historical sources which offer a means of connecting with teachers’ perceptions and self-images in their respective time periods (Gallagher, 2002; Preskill and Jacobvitz, 2001). We know from other studies that students’ contact with these and other primary historical sources can serve as a way of ‘demythologizing the educational past’, thus allowing students the opportunity to ‘meet’ kindergarten teachers from past generations as warm, dedicated and mindful educators – with a healthy sense of humour, to boot (Depaepe, 1997). Most importantly, the narratives describe in great detail the kindergarten teachers’ interactions with children and parents, the design and implementation of learning activities, and the forms of professional reflection in which they themselves were engaged as they sought to overcome (and to enjoy) the real day-to-day challenges in working with kindergarten children. What would it mean for students
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to hear Froebelian ‘teachers’ own voices and to understand their [historical professional] culture from the inside’ (Cortazzi, 2002: 1)?

A number of studies have examined readers’ (that is, students’) response to literature, especially autobiographical and/or historical narratives (Pike, 2003; Carter, 1993; Convery, 1999; Gallagher, 2002). Based upon a reader response approach to literature (i.e. focusing on the reader’s experience rather than on the text itself), one would expect the readers’ perspectives to change in some way as a result of their interaction with the text excerpts (Jauss, 1982; Iser, 1978). In order to assess the extent and quality of this change, the study encouraged trainee teachers to reflect upon their own perspectives on the text excerpts and then analysed those responses in order to determine whether and how trainee teachers understand Froebelian teachers’ experiences, culture and beliefs in the past and relate them to early years teaching in the present.

The study’s data was gathered according to a so-called Campbell and Stanley post-test only scheme (Bernard, 2000), in which student volunteers from BA primary education ITT courses at several UK universities were randomly assigned to two groups. One group was given the text excerpts to read; the other was not. Members of both groups were interviewed individually. The semi-standardised interviews were digitally recorded for later transcription and analysis. Participants were asked, for example, about themselves as future teachers, their conceptions of early years teaching in the past, whether they think historical awareness is important, and whether or how they think the work of early years educators done then and now is very different. The interviews included scheduled probes and improvised follow-up questions appropriate to the study’s focus and which arose from interactions within the interview itself (Kvale, 1996).

The data from both groups was assessed using narrative analysis in which analytic categories for theorizing the data were predetermined whilst leaving room for some to emerge from the participants’ answers (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The participants’ construction of themselves and of early years education in the present day was compared with the messages and perspectives drawn from their engagement with the historical narratives in order to determine the extent to which they relate to both the historical teachers in context and to the types of reflective practice they exemplify.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that historical narratives of Froebel-trained teachers can indeed increase students’ and teachers’ professional awareness, and may also help them to engage in more critical reflection on their practice. Study participants reported varying extents of exposure to early years history in their courses of studies, with which all of them described in terms of a chronology of ‘big names’ and theories in early years pedagogy; seven participants referred to particular forms of early education (e.g. infant schools and kindergartens) which they associated with ‘history’. None reported any previous exposure to texts written by female educators about their experiences working in those or any other early years institutions in the past.

Study participants in the control group (i.e. those not exposed to excerpts from historical narratives) described themselves as having little to no knowledge of early years professions (or of teaching in general) in past times. When prompted to imagine and to relate personally to the work of early years teachers in the distant or recent past, their responses showed that they imagined early years teaching in the distant past (a) to have been completely Three Rs based and (b) to have been much less specialised and professionalised a field than it was. They could not readily imagine points of commonality between their own chosen career and the work done in, for example, kindergartens 70 or more years before. In general their responses were short (<10 words) and further prompting did not result in meaningfully different or longer responses.

By contrast, those who were given excerpts from historical narratives to read readily related their own ideas and experiences of early years teaching to the experiences of kindergartners in the past – both in particular historical periods and over time. They described the stories as
‘familiar’ and ‘out of time’; as one interviewee noted about a situation described in an excerpt: ‘That still happens . . . probably every single day . . . I find that really challenging as well.’ They also spoke at greater length and in more depth about what it might have been like to teach in the past and what might have constituted professionalism in early years over time.

The results of this small-scale study suggest that students’ exposure to and engagement with historical teacher narratives might serve several purposes at once, including increasing students’ professional awareness and helping them to engage in more critical reflection on their own practices (Aitken and Mildon, 1992; Carlgren and Linblad, 1991). This study was initially conceived with the hope of interviewing ITT primary students in courses with Froebelian emphases, but a dearth of volunteers meant that the study relied upon ITT primary students without any early years background to speak of. Interestingly, the interview findings suggest that such narratives might even help to introduce elements of Froebelian pedagogy into teacher training where currently is none.

All of these findings point to the desirability of a more extensive survey including a larger number of participants and including those in and outside of early years ITT courses, both explicitly Froebelian and not. Increasing the number of students and expanding the scope of the study from one interview to a series of before and after interviews would also permit a more systematic assessment of precisely how the excerpts from different historical narratives might impact early years professionals’ (or trainees’) own habits of reflection in teaching praxis.