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Critical thinking and critical being: interpretations of criticality among groups of diverse initial teacher education (ITE) students

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Abstract: Taking a qualitative, phenomenological approach, this paper examines ‘international’ students’ interpretations of criticality on an ITE programme as they develop understanding of becoming critically reflective educators. Rooted in critical pedagogy, the study characterises criticality as falling into definitions of critical thinking and critical being. Following semi-structured interviews, the study shares the findings for a group of mature, diverse students who were educated in a number of countries, and who seemed to initially ‘struggle’ with criticality on the British ITE programme. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis, the paper concludes that criticality is a familiar concept for all, but affective factors play a part in how students engage with it. Rather than start with a deficit model that ‘international’ students lack the ability to be critical, it is suggested that students benefit from opportunities and spaces to share their previous educational and life experiences to value their understanding of criticality.

Paper: Introduction

This paper examines the educational experiences of a group of ‘international’ student-teachers on an ITE programme as they develop and engage with criticality. The students are ‘international’ as they spent the majority of their lives in other countries and have a broad range of professional and academic qualifications having lived there. However, they are also British in that they migrated to the UK as adults and have made their lives here. Despite being highly qualified and experienced, when the students began the ITE course, they seemed to lack confidence in their own abilities as critically engaged students. It is argued that the students had formed an ‘intercultural’ identity (Meer and Modood, 2012), and were not only learning to teach, but also learning to learn in a different culture as they navigated the academic requirements and protocols of the ITE programme. At the same time, they faced the reality that their previous experiences as HE students and working professionals held little value. As the teacher educators, we did not acknowledge their life experiences; we assumed that they would engage in criticality as they had met the entry criteria. It is argued in this paper that

as educators, we examine the nature of criticality and plan opportunities for students to share their experiences to become critically-engaged teachers.

Literature review

In order to understand the students' understanding of criticality, it was necessary to define the term, which was a challenge. The students were able to offer examples of when they believed they engaged in criticality, but defining it within a British academic context proved problematic. This led to the question of what criticality means across cultures. As the body that oversees professional standards for teachers in the lifelong learning sector, the Education Training Foundation (ETF) stipulates that:

'Teachers and trainers are **reflective** and **enquiring** practitioners who think **critically** about their own educational assumptions, values and practice in the context of a changing contemporary and educational world' (ETF, 2014)

There are two crucial aspects within the above statement; the first that teachers must be continuously reflecting and questioning, and the second that they need to consider their own perspectives of education and the impact within a broader context. This suggests that a definition of criticality emerges that focuses on reflection and questioning, standards and competences, and the ability to use appropriate academic conventions taught within critical thinking frameworks. In addition, there is a need to consider personal traits that lead to individuals becoming 'critical beings', which Dunne (2015: 87) defines as being able to 'move from being narrators of our own lives, to becoming authors'. Thus, the students are aware of who they are, and are able to conceptualise new ways of thinking that may lead to transformation of the individual and the teaching environment (Barnett, 1997). Barnett (1997) designed a taxonomy of criticality in which he identified levels and domains of criticality that lead to students becoming 'critical beings', which may be linked to Freire's (1972) analysis of criticality as one that examines the role of power and emancipation. Thus, a nuanced interpretation of criticality that encompasses aspects of critical thinking and critical being is essential to ensure educators examine their own biases while adhering to the professional and academic standards (Hammersley-Fletcher and Hanley, 2016). Maringe and Jenkins (2015) highlight the deficit terms western educators refer to when developing international post-graduate students' academic writing skills, and argue that this may be evidence of bias against students whose educational experiences are varied and diverse. Consequently, this study reports on the experiences of such students and their understandings of criticality, while advocating that educators are aware of their own biases.

Research design

To give voice to students' experiences, an interpretative, phenomenological approach offered an opportunity to gather the students' life stories with semi-structured questions that enabled the participants to talk as freely as possible about their educational experiences. This small-scale study did not seek to find generalisability, rather, it was an opportunity to gather rich data about individual participants' educational journeys and how they believed their critical capacity developed. The study involved ten students who were enrolled on an ITE programme or who had recently completed such a course of studies at an English HEI. The participants had spent the majority of their lives in other countries, had graduated with various academic qualifications from non-western and western universities, and had migrated to the UK as adults. Two semi-structured interviews were planned with

each participant so that the data from the first interview could be followed up during the second if necessary.

Data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as it allows for an in-depth, idiographic exploration of participants' lived experiences, thus moving beyond a descriptive account (Smith, Flowers et al, 2009). This also allowed participants to share any affective barriers that prevented their ability to be critical.

Findings and conclusions

Analysing the data using IPA enabled the participants' experiences to be examined in-depth and their individual stories to be heard. Themes emerged from the data analysis that were grouped into super-ordinate themes and sub-themes. This allowed for individual differences to be considered, as well as similarities among the participants to be highlighted.

The analysis of the findings suggested that there needs to be a 'critical space' in which students and educators can share their understanding of how criticality emerges through life experiences. For students, this space is vital for their experiences to be acknowledged and even encouraged so that they can share their conceptions of criticality, and perhaps increase their own confidence in their ability to be critical. For educators, the 'critical space' offers an opportunity for them to reflect on their own biases, and perhaps consider whose knowledge of pedagogy is shared on the ITE programmes. The space also offers time for academic writing conventions and processes of reflection to be examined. Thus, the space is one in which critical thinking skills can be developed, as well notions of critical being in which students and educators can share their values and experiences of education

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