STUDENT ACADEMIC IDENTITY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD FIELD-BASED INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

Dr Nicola Dunham
Tai Poutini Polytechnic, Auckland

Abstract

This overall aim of this paper is to report on PhD (Education) research critically examining the nature and significance of academic identity for students in early childhood field based initial teacher education (FBITE) in Aotearoa New Zealand. Student academic identity is defined as the appropriation of academic values and practices within a sense of self, reflecting the willingness and commitment to the practices of the academic community. Student academic identity was identified as consisting of five elements: self-theory, achievement indicators, agency-beliefs, motivation and dispositions. An interpretive qualitative research design was used with data gathered from students, Teacher Educators and Associate Teachers. Data collection involved open-ended questionnaires interviews, and documentary analysis. Data was analysed using the principles of thematic analysis. The findings show that, for students in FBITE programmes, academic identity development is complex, intertwined with emerging professional identities, and influenced by learning contexts and the conflicting roles and commitments held in addition to being a student. This research is significant due to the limited research presenting a holistic view of student academic identity, examining all of these five elements, and the lack of literature focusing specifically on this issue for students in FBITE.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to report on PhD (Education) research critically examining the nature and significance of academic identity for students in early childhood field based initial teacher education (FBITE) in Aotearoa New Zealand. FBITE is one form of initial teacher education and is particularly favoured within the early childhood sector (Kane, 2005). By definition, FBITE consists of study sites other than the main education providers campus (Kane, 2005). These study sites include the academic classroom, the regular weekly work-experience undertaken in an early childhood centre, for regular weekly teaching experience, and additional early childhood centres forming the practicum element of the programme.

The credentialing of early childhood teachers within Aotearoa New Zealand has been an area of tension for a number of years (Gibbons, Farquhar, & Tesar, 2016; May, 2006). Recent moves to attain pay parity with teachers in the compulsory sector have resulted in the requirement that early childhood teachers attain qualifications at bachelor degree level; despite the two year Diploma of Teaching in early childhood education (DipTchgECE) being a minimum requirement for the purposes of teacher registration (Ministry of Education, 2002).

As a consequence, many early childhood teachers holding a teaching diploma in ECE sought to upgrade their qualification to that of a bachelor degree in order to both attain pay parity and also remain in positions of employment (Findsen, 2009). Institutions replaced delivery of the DipTchgECE with that of a Bachelor of Teaching (BTchgECE) once it was noted that, despite being of similar level on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2013), those holding a BTchgECE were paid considerably more than those with a DipTchgECE (Careersnz mana

rapuara aotearoa, 2014).

These changes in credentialing have been equated with an increase in academic demands placed on students as institutional programme development was required to show the points of difference between the previously delivered diploma and the new BTchgECE. Such points of difference include the increase in academic demand associated with study for a bachelor degree, which has associated concerns regarding student academic literacies.

Academic Literacies and Field-Based study

Academic literacies refers to the practices, values, attitudes and social relationships associated with the academic community, and which connect to and shape interactions in the academic world (Gee, 2006; Perry, 2012). Through undertaking study, students join the academic community and as such are agreeing to participate in the Discourse (with a big D), which according to Gee (1996, p. 131), refers to:

> A socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and artifacts, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network".

Gee's conceptualisation of Discourse opens up understandings of literacies so that, rather than being seen as solely language and text bound, academic literacies include consideration of matters of social participation, social agency and identity.

Student academic identity

Student academic identity refers to the appropriation of academic values and practices within a sense of self, reflecting the willingness and commitment to the practices of the academic community. A review of the literature led to the theorisation that student academic identity consists of five core elements, namely: self-theory, achievement indicators, agency-beliefs, motivation and dispositions.

Self-theory

Self-theories are based on a combination of internal and externally derived knowledge and are associated with a belief in one's own self to behave in a particular way (Bandura, 1995). Self-esteem is an important aspect of self-theory and relates to the emotional dimension of self-perceptions (Krause, Bochner, & Duchesne, 2003). Self-esteem may be positive (high) or negative (low), and in the academic context self-esteem is linked with self-comparison with fellow students, the relationships formed within the academic environment potentially influencing student engagement and participation in academic tasks. Self-efficacy also relates to self-esteem in the academic context (Krause et al., 2003). Higher self-efficacy is associated with higher levels of self-confidence, which are important for managing challenges and stresses within academic study. High self-efficacy is associated with a personal sense of agency, influence and control, to attain successful outcomes. Conversely low self-esteem is associated with feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy, which may impact on further elements of academic identity such as motivation.

Achievement indicators

Achievement indicators refer to the degree to which a student realises their educational goals (Sepehrian Azar, 2013), acting as a gauge to the likelihood of meeting with academic success. In relation to student academic identity, achievement indicators provide essential messages informing a sense of self in terms of confidence, efficacy (Was, Al-Harthy, Stack-Oden, & Isaacson, 2009).

Feedback is an example of an achievement indicator, involving the provision of information about performance or understanding enabling students to gain insight into their academic ability (Schunk & Mullen, 2013; Timperley, 2013). Feedback can be both formative and summative, in that it can be used to inform a student as to areas for future development prior to a final measure of success (Brown

& Race, 2012). Positive feedback, in terms of areas of student success, can lead to an increase in positive self-perceptions, and increases in motivation. Negative feedback, on the other hand, in the form of poorer than anticipated or desired grades or lower expectations on competency measures, can be related to negative impacts on self-belief reducing motivation and engagement in academic study (Timperley, 2013).

Agency-beliefs

Agency-beliefs refer to personal strategies and how students use them in order to attain academic success. Agency-beliefs are associated with knowing what to do to achieve academic success, and are closely aligned with, but remain separate to, motivation (Walls & Little, 2005). Agency within the academic context relates to degrees of activity, passivity, and perceptions of personal control that students hold in relation to learning (Ryan, 2009). In terms of student actions such agency relates to strategies such as: time-keeping, organisation, taking notes, using effective research skills to gather information, managing academic workloads and assessment deadlines, and the prioritising of commitments (Lai, 2011a).

Agency-beliefs utilise self-regulatory processes through which a student as proactive agent directs their own learning (Zimmerman, 2002). Self-regulated learners demonstrate autonomy through knowing how and when to seek help in achieving goals, with help seeking behaviour being defined as "requests for assistance, clarification, information, and checking-of-work from teachers" (Calarco, 2011, p. 865). As such agency beliefs and self-regulation processes comprise the thoughts, feelings and behaviours a student holds towards goal achievement.

Motivation

Motivation consists of a number of components including beliefs around task value, goal orientation, and affect. In terms of task value, motivation relates to whether the student is setting out on a learning pathway of their own choosing, intrinsic motivation, or one in which they are fulfilling the academic expectations of others, usually parents, termed external motivation (Dweck, 2000). Intrinsic motivational properties consist of orientations towards learning, such as whether learning is regarded as meaningful and enjoyable, and hence the commitment and willingness displayed in engaging with academic practices. Furthermore, student academic motivation is said to be influenced by factors such as the student's self-concept and self-efficacy, making a connection with self-theory (Rodriguez, 2009).

Motivation is also associated with goal orientation. Achieving goals is associated with the personal approaches taken within learning situations, and whether students engage in actions of pursuing or avoiding learning situations. As such goal orientation relates to student academic identity in a number of ways; motivationally and the achievement of personal learning goals; self-theory, in terms of comparison of self with peers on academic tasks; agency, in terms of energy, the desire to learn and activity applied to learning; and dispositions, associated with intellectual curiosity (Howell & Watson, 2007).

Dispositions

Dispositions consist of "habits of mind" (Lai, 2011b, p. 16), including values and beliefs, strategies and intentions (Freeman, 2003). The dispositions and qualities a student holds are examples of personal resources influencing navigation of, and participation in the social world. In relation to the academic context, general academic dispositions include attitudes towards working hard, paying attention, participation, commitment to academic study, ways of recovering from set-backs, how challenges are approached and points of focus such as seeing personal failings or challenges to overcome (Bandura, 1995).

Dispositions also relate to student attitudes towards knowledge construction in the form of information processing styles. These cognitive strategies influence how events are perceived, experienced and interpreted, the meaning that is attached to them, and in turn future patterns of responding to like

situations. These styles of processing relate to how receptive students are to new knowledge and are also associated with perceptions of knowledge and intelligence (Dweck, 2000), including: "what knowledge is, how knowledge is gained, and the degree of certainty with which knowledge can be held" (Brownlee & Berthelsen, 2006, p. 17).

Methodology

An interpretive methodology was used, utilising qualitative data collection methods. Participation was obtained from five providers of BTchgECE, with one site acting as a pilot study. Data, via questionnaires, was gathered from 205 student participants: 134 first-year students in their first semester of study, and 71 final-year students in their final semester of study. There was an overall response rate of 66% for first-year and 45% for the final-year student samples.

Additional data was gathered via focus groups with teacher educators (TE) involved in the delivering of the programmes of FBITE from across the institutions. Further participation was sought from a small sample of five associate teachers (AT) who, as qualified and registered teachers, support students from a range of institutions in the teaching practice components of their teacher education. Data from associate teachers were gathered through individual interviews.

Finally, data was collected via documentary analysis in regards to the wider socio-political context in which FBITE is situated in Aotearoa New Zealand. Data was analysed using thematic analysis informed by the principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Goulding, 2002).

Presentation of Findings

This section presents data gathered from the student participant samples. This is followed by a synthesis of data from the TE and ATs.

Student data

Demographic information gives an indication of current make up of students across four institutions delivering programmes of FBITE. The majority of students, whether at the start of their study or near completion, were below thirty years of age. The majority of first year and final year students identified as Pakeha/New Zealand European. Overall only 7 of the 205 participants identified as male.

The following common themes were collated from analysis of data from first year and final year students from all four of the participating institutions.

Academic tasks

This theme relates to the kind of academic tasks or activities that students preferred. Overall students reported less interest in reading over writing and discussion based activities. Academic reading was found to be particularly challenging due to the complexity of academic language and it not being a preferred way of learning. Phrases associated with academic reading included dislike and it being forced rather than selected. For instance, responses included: "hate it", and "got to" or "have to" do it. Academic writing whilst not the most liked academic task was found to be more preferable as it provided a way of gauging progress. A challenge with academic writing was knowing what the expectations were and clarity of instruction. Discussions, and in particular face to face ones, were the most favoured academic task; positively associated with being able to, according to one respondent: "open up areas that we can discuss that maybe we wouldn't have thought of alone. Get new feedback too". Whilst another student valued the way that through discussion: "my thoughts and feelings and opinions are taken on board and are worth something".

Self-Regulation

In the data self-regulation was primarily associated with help-seeking or self-reliance. According to

the current research findings help-seeking behaviour was more prevalent in first year students who typically asked others if they were unsure of academic work or tasks. The final year students reported a more equal likelihood of engaging in either help-seeking or self-reliant behaviour, however, when sought, help-seeking was associated with strong emotional states such as feelings of panic and stress.

Help was reported to have been sought from different channels, which included peers, lecturers, colleagues and/or family. The following is an example of this theme from within the data, in which a student said: "If I find it hard to understand I ask lecturers or peers. It seems to have sunk in when I am around others but as soon as I am at home I'm struggling". Another student commented: "Often I have had to seek support from other members of staff at my centre and contact tutors for clarification". Overall help was more likely to be sought from peers rather than those in more expert positions, such as lecturers, associate teachers or academic support services.

Self-reliance was associated with gathering more information, working out problems and finding solutions. Self-reliance was associated with such responses such as overcoming struggles by persevering and was further associated with emotions such as frustration, panic, doubt and confusion. Finally, a limited number of students reported cases of procrastination.

Engagement

Engagement in academic study was associated with attendance. High levels of importance were associated with attendance as a means of showing commitment to study, showing willingness to learn, gaining access to information and being considered important for overall academic success. For example, one respondent reported: "I find attendance deeply important. If I miss a class I feel I might miss out on relevant information". In addition, this same student identified that the programme design of just one day in class supported balancing multiple life commitments and so made attendance easier. Where students reported a minimum attendance rate as part of programme expectations, they felt this gave the message that full attendance was not necessary.

Engagement was also about a sense of immersion in academic study. Students reported that wider family and community commitments were the predominant reasons as to why they did not feel fully immersed in study. As identified by one respondent life could get busy and that did not mean that study was a priority: "I am quite busy but I place a lot of emphasis on study. Sometimes study is not on the main priorities list if other important stuff is occurring".

Praxis

Preference for experiential learning was strong. Students reported being active, hands-on and practical learners. Praxis was also valued due to the opportunity it provided to implement and consolidate knowledge and understandings through practical application in centres. Engaging in praxis on a regular basis was regarded as motivating as shown by the following response: "Wouldn't do a course without it. Get to learn/experience/experiment…. Keeps my motivation up". Praxis was also positively associated with achievement success through enabling participation in study and providing a safe space for learning.

Feedback

Feedback was associated with making study meaningful, boosting self-confidence and self-belief in academic ability. This is all represented in the following response: "Gaining surprisingly high marks believing in myself". Negative feedback could be responded to in either a negative or positive way. An example of a positive response to negative feedback includes: "I feel disappointed but it makes me more determined to work harder". Negative responses to negative feedback included feelings of upset, panic, stress, and annoyance.

Transformation

Academic study was reported to be associated with a form of personal transformation. Increases in self-confidence were one such reported example of transformation. This confidence was associated

with an emerging professional identity as teacher as well as increased self-efficacy and self-awareness. For example, one respondent said: "I have changed HUGELY. I am more confident in my teaching practice, more informed. I have a "professional voice". I can back up my beliefs, theories and philosophies with literature. [I am] taken more seriously as a teacher". Transformation was also associated with developing awareness of personal assumptions and developing the capacity to consider alternative perspectives.

Achievement indicators

Achievement indicators relate to measures of academic success. Grades and building relationships with children in the centres were reported as indicators of achievement. For example, for one respondent academic grades acted to increase self-efficacy: "To see my academic results. I never thought myself capable of doing a degree course". Achievement indicators were also associated with feedback and associated responses to feedback.

Value of academic practices

Value was attributed to academic practices when there was alignment with the professional practice of teaching. A strong association was made again with praxis and the value of being able to combine theory and practice through regular and sustained field-based experiences. Tension did exist especially when there was misalignment between what was portrayed in the academic class and the reality of the teaching in the early childhood centre. For example, one respondent commented: "They fit well but I would add that it depends on the teaching team as to whether they [academic practices] are valued by other teachers". There was concern expressed regarding consistency of academic standards with some respondents regarding academic expectations as being too harsh and others regarding standards as being too low.

Academic practices were positively associated with professional development. However, the likelihood of undertaking further academic study was limited: with preference for professional development of a non-academic (non-accredited) nature.

Contextual perspectives

Whilst the previous section presented the findings from students for whom academic identity was a lived experience, the aim of this section is to extend this understanding by informing on the context in which academic study is situated. This section provides a synthesis of the findings from data collected from teacher educators (TE)s, associate teachers (AT) and documentary analysis associated with the socio-political context of FBITE.

It was identified that less experience within the field prior to study was evident, with students demonstrating a higher level of academic preparedness for undertaking early childhood FBITE than previously. This change in student demographic was thought contentious, with the concern that despite this academic preparedness, students still found academic demands challenging, with parallel attitudes that 'C's make degrees' being reported. Furthermore, reports as to graduate capability and academic rigour, were evident and related to issues of consistency. Internal consistency within a programme was associated with the academic variability of TEs themselves, and hence the academic expectations they had of students. External consistency, across providers of early childhood FBITE, was questioned in terms of attitudes of some programmes being considered an "easy option", in terms of academic demands placed on students.

The data from TEs and ATs identified that the complexity of student lives had the potential to impact negatively on academic study, with time management being a particular area of concern. The time needed to invest in academic study was identified as challenging in terms of the inflexibility of the academic programme, which was regarded as a particular issue for those students who were also in full time employment in early childhood centres.

Likewise, the careful balancing of academic and practice demands was identified as a particular

tension, with the fear that increased academisation of early childhood FBITE was taking students away from, and diluting their practice-based experiences. Field-based experiences were regarded as potentially being side-lined, and regarded as being "attached to" rather than "embedded within" programmes.

Discussion of findings

The following section is organised around themes emerging from the research findings.

Nature of student academic identity

Whilst all were evidenced, not all of the five constituent elements of student academic identity were found to hold equal influence. Agency-beliefs were both strongly influencing aspects of student academic identity and, likewise were, influenced by the other four constituent elements. As identified in the literature agency-beliefs are associated with knowing what to do to achieve academic success and relate to self-regulation, meta-cognition, autonomy and a will to learn (Barnett, 2007; Deakin-Crick & Wilson, 2005; Lai, 2011a; Ryan, 2009). It can be concluded that knowledge of both what to do and how to do it are necessary even if students are highly motivated, confident and manifest appropriate dispositions. Having the motivation to learn is not enough in itself to succeed at academic study.

Agency-beliefs place the student at the centre of their own learning, with the focus on personal capacity and autonomy. This personal capacity calls for a sense of ownership and active engagement with the process of learning as well as course content. This line of thought highlights the role of help-seeking behaviour as an example of such personal capacity in how students direct their own learning towards achieving their personal goal. The research findings highlight the prevalence of student help-seeking behaviour and also the sources from which help is sought.

The findings raise concerns as to the tendency for students to seek help from peers, rather than academic staff (Williams & Takaku, 2011). By not seeking help from authority figures, such as TEs and ATs, adaptive/strategic help-seeking is not fully utilized and instead an aspect of avoidant behaviour becomes evident. Furthermore, seeking help from peers rather than from authority figures may relate to mindsets and the fear that such an external show of facing an academic challenge may be perceived as personal failure, which would align with an entity or fixed view of intelligence (Dweck, 2000). The reported prevalence of help-seeking behaviour was also associated with strong negative emotional states such as feelings of panic and stress, which is known to potentially impact negatively on academic success (Singh, 2011).

A connection was found between identities associated with the personal community of the student and self-regulatory behaviour, as an aspect of agency-beliefs. It was time–management that was most adversely affected by the social roles associated with student personal lives. It was not so much a matter of Discourse alignment between academic and personal communities as it was the logistics and practicalities of managing competing demands, with students prioritising responsibilities associated with their personal communities over academic demands (Thomas, 2012). In the specific context of this research the evidence suggests that students with family commitments struggle with developing a positive academic identity due to the challenge to prioritisation of the demands of the academic community over their other personal communities. This knowledge aligns with adult learning theory with participation in learning regarded as linked to roles as workers and family members (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). As such this research enhances understanding of the current demographic and complexities of being a student whereby student academic identity is situated within a wider frame of reference.

Finally, in relation to the element of achievement indicators, this research adds to the existing knowledge base on negative achievement indicators being used for positive ends. In support of existing literature (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Timperley, 2013), there was evidence of students drawing on personal resources in order to use negative achievement indicators as a source of value and

insight. This connection with personal resources again signifies the importance of agency-beliefs through the use of self-determined actions associated with thoughts, feelings and behaviours as proactive agents in the learning process.

Student academic identity was described according to positive or negative experiences. Further to this, student academic identity was found to be precarious and contradictory in that one and the same person could report both positive and negative states of academic identity. These conflicting responses add insight into how interpretations of experiences and the attribution of meaning can shift and as such how student academic identity does not develop in a predictable way. This unpredictability is in keeping with the notion that identity development is not about reaching a final end point akin to a project awaiting completion. Rather, student academic identity involves continual monitoring and reflection on the messages given about self and meaning making through engagement in the social world (Elliott, 2014).

Emerging professional identity

Identity is associated with the meaning and role held as group member (Stets & Burke, 2005), which may vary significantly from one social group to the next. The research findings indicate that social identity, consisting of feelings associated with membership of the academic community, is on the whole temporary or transitory in nature. Few students identified holding a future self as one involving further participation in the academic community in terms of on-going academic study. Student academic identity therefore, performs a functional role as it is the means by which academic Discourse is navigated and professional credentialing achieved.

In the current research social identity within the academic community was influenced by personal identity through dispositions (Barnett, 2004, 2007; White & Lowenthal, 2011). Positive dispositions were found to align with more positive engagement with the academic community, and in the current research were expressed as engagement in study. However, negative dispositions led to less engagement with the academic study and a more fraught attitude towards the academic community in terms of relevance and value.

The research findings identified a relationship between membership of the professional community and membership of the academic community and student academic identity. Student engagement with the academic community was found to be stronger when experiences within the professional community could be drawn on. For instance, praxis was reported to enhance deeper cognitive engagement with study through the opportunity to apply learning. Also, directly linking academic learning to experiences in the professional domain, added relevance and value to the academic process as learning (Gee, 2006).

The evidence from the current research indicates that it is membership of the professional community that holds longevity (Thomas, 2012). The academic aspect of credentialing is a tolerated part of the process to achieving the ultimate professional goal. This toleration of the academic aspect of the credentialing process equates to a temporary form of identification with academic Discourse. This temporary identity (Conde, 2011), performs a functional role as it is the means by which academic Discourse is navigated. It is also functional because through this engagement with the academic aspect of initial teacher education, a professional identity can emerge through sustained involvement in the credentialing process. According to this research, the academic identity of students in early childhood FBITE, on the whole, diminishes as professional identity grows, as shown by membership of the academic community as being more of a means to an end rather than a desired long-term affiliation.

In this particular context, the personal community is used to encompass the multiple social groups outside of any direct relation to their study. For instance, such personal community is conceptualised as consisting of family, church groups, sports groups and so forth; all with their own social, role and personal identity features. In relation to student academic identity this personal community is of particular relevance due to the tension commitments to multiple roles places on engagement with academic study and, therefore, on student academic identity. Overwhelming, it was family

commitments that meant that students reported being unable to feel fully immersed in study, through being the dedication of sufficient time and effort.

The current research findings show that although academic identity may not be the driving force for student engagement in FBITE, it is none-the-less significant. For those who participated in this research, academic study was identified as a big undertaking, drawing on drive, persistence, resilience and perseverance to see it through amidst the many competing demands of their wider lives. The challenge for students was not solely the closeness of fit between Discourses between social groups and the academic community (Thomas, 2012). Rather, it was also about the logistics and practicalities of managing competing demands.

Finally, overall immersion in academic study did not vary between first year and final year student; highlighting that longer duration of time spent in academic study did not equate to deeper levels of immersion, as the challenges of multiple roles remained the same. This runs counter to the overall understandings of community involvement becoming stronger with increased time (Wenger, 2010).

Concluding Comments

The ultimate goal of becoming an early childhood teacher was the driver through which academic identity was confronted. It is concluded that student academic identity is intertwined with an emerging professional identity, with the reason for under taking academic study being professional credentialing, with the academic aspect of the learning experience being a tolerated part of achieving this ultimate professional goal. To gain full participation in the professional community requires engaging, albeit temporarily, in the academic community. The academic community therefore act as gatekeepers to the teaching profession, which is interesting given the contentious relationship between academics and teaching (Henkel, 2005). It can be concluded that membership of the academic community was more of a means to an end rather than a desired long-term affiliation, with ongoing professional development being associated with non-academic modes of learning. This research sheds light on the potential points of tension for programmes balancing academic and professional or work oriented needs, which is significant given the intertwined nature of student academic identity with an emerging professional identity.

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