Engaging the refugee community of Greater Western Sydney

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This paper discusses the community engagement program, *Refugee Action Support* (RAS) at the University of Western Sydney. RAS is a partnership program between the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation, The NSW Department of Education and Training and the university. The Refugee Action Support program prepares pre-service teachers to teach and work with marginalised students in greater Western Sydney, a region of social and educational disadvantage. RAS enables young, newly arrived refugees in greater Western Sydney to develop socially as well as academically. While refugee students may be keen to engage with the regular academic and social practices within classrooms and schools, they face a dilemma in meeting the language and literacy expectations within particular curriculum content and in relation to particular pedagogical strategies. For teachers working with students in these contexts this poses tensions as they struggle to create conditions in which students can participate in mainstream classrooms, and at the same time meet these students' academic, social and linguistic needs. RAS acts as a catalyst for the rebuilding of a new social and educational world through literacy acculturation. Tutors, equipped with the skills to work with disadvantaged students are more effective in teaching content to diverse students and are more effective in assisting students to demonstrate proficiency in syllabus outcomes because they are able to appreciate the complexities faced by the second language learner in the mainstream high school. The partnership program is very important in ensuring that every person working with the refugee students knows his or her role in order to maximise and accelerate learning for these students.

Introduction

The complexity and fluidity of the modern world implies that changes in knowledge and in social, economic and political structures have become characteristic of our lives. When teachers have not been sufficiently trained to understand the difficulties and experiences of refugee children, they frequently misinterpret the students and their families' culturally inappropriate attempts to succeed in their new environment (Hones, 2002; Lee, 2002; Trueba et al., 1990). The school therefore can be viewed as a major source of security for students when teachers are willing and well-trained to detect refugee students' needs (Ascher, 1989; Eisenbruch, 1988; Pérez, 2001). Teachers whose home contexts are outside the students own experience, including attitudes related to living and teaching within diverse communities and expectations can experience difficulty in school classrooms. Hence, it is necessary for teachers to broaden their focus beyond the classroom concerns of instruction and management and to develop skills that enable them to change the life chances of the students they teach (Cochran-Smith, 2001). Hones (2002) reported on research in which his students, who were teachers, chose families from Laos, Mexico, Kurdistan, and Kosovo to understand the political, social, and cultural backgrounds of a refugee or immigrant family in their school or town. As a result of their research, the teachers reported transformations in their own attitudes, in terms of their empathy with and respect for the families with whom they

became acquainted. The recognition of the importance of community engagement in school education is a first step in moving teachers towards the reconstructionist agenda of the critical theorists. If teachers are to develop skills that change the life chances of the students they teach (Cochran-Smith, 2001), then efficacy to engage with the community, particularly the community within which the students live, should be considered as central to the task of teaching. While such engagement is confronting, preparing teachers for such community engagement in pre-service education is important in that it allows teachers to gain an understanding of the contexts of the lives of the students (Dunkin, 1996).

Community engagement in the School of Education

Within education, the past decade has witnessed growing numbers of teacher educators organising school-university partnerships intended to promote professional development, improve the preparation of teachers and increase learning (Goodlad 1994; Osguthorpe et al., 1995).Community engagement pedagogy itself is founded on engaging students directly in their communities to improve those communities. During the period following World War II, governments were expected to play the dominant role in providing education. Support for this expanded role was contained in various international resolutions, including the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. However, the last quarter of the twentieth century brought a swing of the pendulum. As the financial and other limitations of government capacity gained wider recognition, advocacy of community participation again became stronger. The Declaration of the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) stated that:

> Partnerships at the community level … should be encouraged; they can help harmonize activities, utilize resources more effectively, and mobilize additional financial and human resources where necessary (WCEFA Secretariat, 1990, p.58)

A related sentiment was expressed in the Delhi Declaration (UNESCO 1994), clause 2.8 that stated:

> Education is, and must be, a societal responsibility, encompassing governments, families, communities and non-governmental organisations alike; it requires the commitment and participation of all, in a grand alliance that transcends diverse opinions and political positions.

A 1997 South African publication also noted (pp. 8–9) that:

> An important aspect of the Schools Act is the principle that there must be a partnership between all stakeholders who have an interest in education. These are the State, parents, learners, educators, other members of the community in the vicinity of your school, special education bodies and the private sector … Parents, learners, educators and others cannot expect the State to give everything and do everything in the school. After all, parents and members of the community are often in the best position to see what the school really needs and what the problems in the school are.

To do this, we as educators in higher education institutions like universities must prepare the professional teachers to develop, lead, manage, teach, work within, and influence society's institutions, including the most basic foundation of education. Besides training future teachers, schools of education at university strongly influence the learning framework of school education. Nieto (2000, p. 180) asserts that we "place equity front and centre of the teacher preparation process if we are to transform teacher education." The process of education should emphasise active, real-world problem solving on the campus and in the larger community. For sustainability, the learning experience for students should include working on actual, real-world problems facing their campus, community, government, and industry. Zhou and Bankston's (2000) extensive report on Vietnamese refugees concluded with a number of recommendations for helping youth succeed. They suggested that school staff and advocates understand students in community contexts. To accomplish this goal, ties are needed between schools and ethnic community groups and between parents and teachers.

The refugee action support program

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the research and practitioner community with knowledge derived from a professional experience (community engagement) strand undertaken in the Masters of Teaching (Secondary) at the University of Western Sydney (UWS). The Refugee Action Support Program is a project of engagement through academic service learning which aims to provide tutoring (tutors are University of Western Sydney Master of Teaching students) to recently arrived African refugee students in western and south western Sydney schools. The Master of Teaching (secondary) is an 18 month post-graduate qualification, within which there are three professional experiences or practicum. Two of these could be described as traditional student teaching placements, where pre-service teachers, under the supervision of a qualified teacher, are assigned a series of classes to teach. The focus of these placements is to essentially provide a means to instruct pre-service teachers in the art and the mechanics of teaching, and to gain some understanding of the daily functions of schools.

The third professional experience (PE3) which comprises sixty hours of service learning is essentially a community engaged practicum and requires pre-service teachers to extend their knowledge and experience beyond the classroom, using their pedagogical and inter-personal skills to support young people in different ways. As such the Refugee Action Support Program does contribute to the success as a teacher by making pre-service students aware of their position within the school environment and by allowing them to adopt critical teaching strategies to challenge the status quo. This is in keeping with the assertion by Cochran–Smith (1999) that 'part of teaching for social justice, is deliberately claiming the role of educator as well as activist based on political consciousness and on the ideological commitment to diminishing the inequities of American life' (p.116).

The Refugee Action Support (RAS) program began in 2007 as a collaborative arrangement between the University of Western Sydney (UWS), the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF), and the New South Wales (NSW) Department of

Education and Training (DET). It aimed to provide targeted literacy and numeracy support to humanitarian refugee students who have transitioned, within the previous two years, from Intensive English Centres (IECs) to mainstream secondary schools. Despite the fact that all refugee children who attend secondary schools are provided with English language instruction through enrolment in Intensive English Centres (IECs), time restrictions of four school terms in government funded centres result in only a partial development of language and acculturation skills. As such, RAS was established within the Master of Teaching (secondary) program at UWS to train pre-service teachers in the vital areas of literacy and numeracy support for refugee students who have transitioned to high school from Intensive English Centres (Ferfolja, et al, 2009)

Four high schools in the Western Sydney region participated in the pilot RAS program in 2007. In 2008, the program expanded to include nine schools. At the same time as they are undertaking PE3, the tutors will also be undertaking a teaching practicum of four weeks in the same school. Two tutoring sessions occur during the year, with two different cohorts of tutors. Each group of tutors provides tutoring sessions to students once a week on Thursdays for a period of twelve weeks. A minimum of two tutors is allocated to each participating school. Each tutor is expected to support a group of three to four students. Schools wishing to participate in the RAS program must offer a teaching practicum placement to each UWS tutor. Schools also have the support of a Community Liaison Officer who can assist in the tutoring sessions and in liaising with students' families. This program is offered to schools in Western Sydney and South Western Sydney with high numbers of refugee student enrolments based on data collected from the ESL Annual Survey and ESL New Arrivals Program surveys. Schools are then selected via an expression of interest process. The program is open to students in years 7 – 11 who entered Australia on a refugee or humanitarian visa. Students are eligible to participate in the first three years after their arrival in Australia. Schools must have a sufficient number of refugee students willing to participate in the program. Refugee students chosen to participate in the program should commit to twelve weeks of full participation in the program (Ferfolja, et al, 2009). The evaluation of the pilot program found that those who attended intermittently rather than regularly showed much less improvement in their literacy and academic achievements.

The ways in which the tutors work during the in-school time is negotiated with the teacher coordinator. During school hours, tutors may spend time assisting students in class; working with a small group of students outside the classroom (e.g. in a learning centre or library); working individually with students outside the classroom; creating teaching and learning resources (e.g. scaffolds) to assist students' engagement in learning and tasks; observing classroom lessons so as to prepare for after-school support. Following the afternoon lessons, tutors provide an after-school tutoring session of two hours. In this time, one and a half hours is allocated for face-to-face tutoring. This is followed by half an hour debriefing session with the teacher coordinator where the tutors can discuss the progress of the students in the tutoring program and any emerging issues. The total amount of time that tutors spend in the schools each week is expected to be three and a half hours. Each participating school is required to nominate a teacher coordinator to oversee the program in the school, including the overseeing of after school tutorials. As part of the initiative, schools are provided with funding to

employ a Community Liaison Officer (CLO) for the equivalent of two hours each week, to assist in improving links with refugee communities. The CLO is responsible for providing bilingual and bicultural support to tutors and school coordinators as negotiated; assisting in communicating with students and parents / caregivers and participating in an evaluation of the program (Ferfolja, et al, 2009).

Evaluations of the program conducted by UWS have found that both teachers and student tutors rate the program as very worthwhile. The tutoring are the basis for providing: small group interaction supporting the literacy development of refugee students, informal contexts for discussing the social requirements of school settings and the impact of capital and 'habitus' as conceptualised by Bourdieu (1986), and transformative experiences for UWS tutors to gain and construct more sophisticated understandings of appropriate pedagogies for teaching refugee students. As Hones's (2002) work in dialogic teacher research has indicated, teachers became more compassionate and willing to work with refugee and immigrant students when they became knowledgeable about their backgrounds. This is significant in providing background necessary for teachers in the field and for those in universities who are preparing new teachers to provide educational opportunities in a caring way to the students about whom the least is known, yet who may require the greatest patience and teaching expertise (Ferfolja, et al, 2009)

Acknowledging too that language practices are manifestations of negotiated social roles and participation, the projects seeks to co-constructively initiate students into the language discourses of the school environment. A number of studies suggest that many students prior to coming to Australia enter the country unaware of the extent to which local accents, fast speech and Australian colloquialisms are going to reduce their ability to speak and understand English in Australia (Scheyvens et al., 2003). It is not only English language that prevents students from speaking and mixing with local students but also knowing what to speak about (Novera 2004, p. 480). For African refugee students, the tutoring centre can be a 'safe space', where refugee students are together with other students from their country. It is smaller than regular classrooms and allows the refugee students to get more attention and develop a special relationship with the tutor. The idea of situated practice involves different forms of language learning suited to specific social or linguistic settings, giving a refugee student the ability to successfully match linguistic output to particular discursive, social or informal settings (Lave & Wegner 1995).

The close dialogic relationship established between student-tutor will enable negotiated meaning, negotiated (personalised) outcomes and the joint construction of texts (oral, print and visual) where discourse features are modeled and made explicit. The training, conducted by the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation, utilises scaffolded literacy and situated practice strategies as well as ESL scales to guide students through skills in discourse elements (genres, registers and codes) that will benefit the young refugee students. Language rules, structures, activities and identities will be immediately contextualised and/or re-negotiated within the 'gives and take' relationship between student and tutor. While the literacy project seeks goal in language development, concomitant aims include (a) empowering students to be active participants within

mainstream curriculum; (b) providing a space where the young people feel comfortable communicating ideas, asking questions and seeking reassurance; and (c) providing a means to ease the transition between educational institutions. The tutoring program is part of the gradual process of personal development where the young person can develop socially as well as academically. As indicated in Lamb et al (2004) "In schools, in a less structured way, this 'individual approach' had significant impact on retaining students, according to the staff interviewed, in the form of student–teacher relationships ... 'If the student finds someone (adult) within the school to form a meaningful relation with, it gives them confidence, inspiration, a role model'."

The engagement between tutors and refugee students creates what Bourdieu (1986) described as social and cultural capital. These concepts basically refer to what a person needs as information necessary to get ahead, including education, and knowing how to present one's self in different social settings (Jenkins 1992). In this study social and cultural capital refers to knowledge and skills that refugee students acquire through their participation in the homework centres. This includes improved literacy development as well as the increased ability to function in schools and other social settings. It is anticipated that through the interactions between tutors and refugee students, information and knowledge about how to operate in schools will be shared. Moreover, tutors are likely to act as role models in their communications and interactions with other participants in the homework centres. Coordinating teachers, as the links between the homework centres and the participating high schools, will also provide useful information about how the refugee students progress in mastering new forms of linguistic, and social skills and abilities, and what difference this makes in the refugee student's participation in school life.

In this way, multiple identities could be constructed by refugee students that satisfy family and community expectations and help them retain their ethnic identity within the wider society (Naidoo 2007). An implication found in the literature is that language use is an important element in the shaping of adolescent self-identity and social abilities. To have limited English language facility may pose significant problems in the construction of new social identities by teenage refugee students in Australia. It is anticipated as an outcome of participation in the homework centres that refugee students, with improved linguistic skills and increased adaptation to the school habitus, will experience increased levels of confidence and ease in dealing with their school environments. While refugee students may be keen to engage with the regular academic and social practices within classrooms and schools, they face a dilemma in meeting the language and literacy expectations within particular curriculum content and in relation to particular pedagogical strategies. For teachers working with students in these contexts this poses an incredible tension as they struggle to create conditions in which students can participate in mainstream classrooms, and at the same time meet these students' particular academic, social and linguistic needs. The homework tutoring centres provides a starting point for understanding in more detail the specific backgrounds and experiences of African refugee students, and also for developing educational strategies to be used by tutors that might best meet the needs of these students.

Pre-service teachers therefore are also encouraged to enrol in the English Second Language Methods course. Language and literacy learning needs apply across the curriculum, and, therefore, ESL pedagogy should be part of many teachers' repertoire. It is not surprising that the NSW Institute of Teacher emphasises literacy and education of NESB (non-English speaking background) students as two of the six mandatory areas of study required of initial teacher education. It is important to note that many Indigenous students also struggle with school-based or academic English, providing rationale for the consideration of Indigenous students in the teaching of ESL pedagogy, An ESL Method, inclusive of issues relating to Indigenous learners, would cater for three of the six mandatory areas of study.

NESB students are presented with instruction delivered in spoken and print English throughout the school day. It is inadequate for ESL pedagogy only to be appear in dedicated ESL classes; it is important that mainstream teachers of the core KLAs have an appreciation for and, more importantly, functional proficiency with ESL pedagogy. Recent research indicates further that withdrawing ESL students from mainstream classroom is ineffective (Lightbrown, 2007; Valdes, 2004), yet equally ineffective are immersion programs which fail to incorporate explicit instruction and scaffolded learning techniques (Lightbrown, 2007). ESL students require regular practice (increased hours) of English in mainstream classroom in which the KLA teachers are experienced with teaching methods that scaffold and structure oral and print language demands (Lightbrown, 2007;Gibbons, 2002; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).

Many graduate teachers, whether in PDHPe, science, maths or history, will encounter students in their classes who have limited proficiency with English language and literacy. A dual or multi-method program that includes ESL as a method option will provide the pre-service teachers with the opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills of how to teach the language, the concepts and communication modes of their particular KLA(s) to classes in which there are high proportions of NESB students. Teachers with an understanding of second language acquisition (SLA) will appreciate the complexities faced by the second language learner in the mainstream high school. Such teachers will recognise the distinction between the capacity of a student to understand a concept and the student's capacity to communicate/express the concept. An ESL pedagogy equips teachers with the skills required that deconstruct the language of a field and then scaffold tasks so as to concurrently develop language and knowledge skills and contexts (E. Brace, personal communication, 31 January 2009).

With these skills, the teachers will be more effective in teaching content to diverse students and be more effective in assisting students to demonstrate proficiency against syllabus outcomes. Since ESL is a method that runs across curriculum, this also can permit graduate teachers to become involved in language and literacy planning across the curriculum areas offered at a school. In the M. Teach, pre-service teachers are taught to have their teaching strategies consistent with the cultural assumptions of the specific minority group they are serving. For example when working with refugees, the instructors are encouraged to ensure that the teaching processes match the learning assumptions of the cultural group, that there is a natural integration between formal instruction and informal social networks and that there are viable connections between

classroom learning and outside uses of literacy. The ESL method classes, focuses on literacy as well, so that whatever is presented or discussed orally, is reinforced by writing and reading about it. This requires that ESL teachers be willing to teach content and literacy. These classes can also provide background information and knowledge about the subject being studied in the 'regular' classroom before the student hears it in English from the classroom or content teacher. The Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation as well as the ESL teacher meet and plan the content so that they are 'thematically' connected. This makes learning much more efficient. The in class experience of the Refugee Action Support Program encourages participation in 'regular' classrooms where the teacher has had some training in working with second language learners and is familiar with second language acquisition issues. In this way, in-services from the non-governmental organisations, community to the school and from the school to the community is very important in ensuring that every person working with the student knows his or her role in order to maximise and accelerate learning for all NESB students (E. Brace, personal communication, 31 January 2009).

Conclusion

The Refugee Action Support program as a partnership literacy program between the NSW Department of Education and Training, the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation and the University of Western Sydney presents a 'plurality of views' approach that allows the learning environment of the targeted refugee tutorial centres in schools in Western and South-Western Sydney operate as participatory classrooms. This approach is inclusive, engaging and very much a refugee centred approach to learning using the combined knowledge of all three organisations to create social change. It is a program in which the cultural and communal resources available to refugees are re-oriented in the new context. The role of the UWS tutor and coordinating teacher is as catalyst for the thoughtful rebuilding of a new social and educational world that has avoided the pitfalls of assimilation through literacy acculturation. The Refugee Action Support program represents therefore collective strategic action designed to transform those conditions in public schools which are alienating particular groups of learners, in this case, refugee learners. The innovative RAS program not only advocates teaching pedagogy that is affirming, empowering and transformative but is also intended to facilitate further discussions for the support and development of skills that are critical for teaching refugee students.

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