Embedding Mental Wellbeing: Methods and Benefits
Collaborative Enhancement Project 2021

Identity development, relationship building and achieving a sense of belonging

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The University of Greenwich offers an intensive two-year accelerated degree in primary education which develops students' awareness of current practice in primary schools and early years settings. It is an ideal option for those wanting to go on and apply for a Schools Direct or PGCE course. Historically, the degree has attracted students from non-academic backgrounds.

In their second year, students are taught on the Engaging Primary Learners (EPL) module, which aims to develop their understanding of the ways in which children actively engage in learning through a wide range of experiences, many of which are beyond the classroom. The module pays particular attention to the importance of play and talk in children's learning and the significance of identity and emotional engagement. However, each year the module lead and I were finding that a large percentage of the cohort struggled to understand the key aims of the module. Although some had encountered their own positive learning experiences beyond the classroom, for many these learning opportunities were something that they had never been offered. This lack of prior knowledge and experience resulted in minimal levels of engagement, poor student feedback and low module outcomes, which was disheartening for two passionate lecturers. Rather than assume that both grades and engagement were low as a direct result of capability, we wanted to view our learners through a more positive lens, one which shone a light on the experiences and the ideas they brought into our sessions, to ensure our module was meaningful and impactful.

It is no secret that 81% of all learning takes place outside the formal classroom. If our module was to be meaningful and effective, we had to link what was happening inside the classroom to what was happening outside; as Banks et al (2001) would say - we wanted to tap into the 'life wide learning' of our students.

As part of my own doctoral studies, I was introduced to Funds of Identity (FoI) concept. FoI was developed by Esteban-Guirtart, and builds upon the Funds of Knowledge theory (Moll et al, 1993). By using a variety of tools and methods that look inwards at a child's self-expression, and how this forms a sense of identity, teachers can better understand and further enhance the school curriculum. According to Esteban-Guirtart:

"Funds of identity include objects, activities, or people who are part of the experience, that is, whatever and whoever might be considered as meaningful to us. In other words, each individual's particular funds of identity are like a box of tools that can be used to define himself or herself" (2016:37).

As part of the metaphorical FoI tool kit that Esteban-Guirtart (2016) refers to, there are five typologies; these include geographical, social, cultural, practical and institutional (see

Esteban-Guirtart, 2016). Traditionally, the FoI approach has been applied to marginalised groups, so it seemed like the perfect concept for us to adopt when working with our students from non-academic backgrounds with whom we wanted to build relationships and greater connections.

We decided to rewrite the module so that the FoI approach formed the foundations of our teaching. Our introduction unit was renamed 'Identity' and across three sessions we invited the students to learn more about our 5 typologies, and then share their own. Students were encouraged to express their identities through a variety of modes including pictures, videos, photos, momentums, objects and drawings. These sessions were a huge success.

As lecturers, we started to see meaningful connections being made amongst the students, and we ourselves started developing more trusting relationships with them. By learning about the students' social FoI and the significant people in their lives, we established a greater understanding of who they live with and their caring responsibilities. Exploration of other funds, such as geographical, allowed us to learn of the lengthy commute that many students were taking to attend the course. With this knowledge we were able to develop greater levels of empathy, compassion and understanding regarding the personal lives of our students. Greater levels of connection were also achieved when we explored the students' practical funds. We learnt that we were working among passionate bakers, gardeners, artists and musicians, who between them, had a wealth of incredible talents that neither one of their lecturers possessed! In later units we supported the students to think about engaging educational experiences for children that could be linked to their own practical FoI. Overall, the sharing of these typologies allowed us to build authentic relationships with our students and develop connections that had not been previously available. But more than this, our students started to feel a sense of belonging. Shortly after the first lecture, I received an email from a student, informing me: "I just wanted to email to let you know that I found your lecture videos really engaging! I normally really struggle with the online videos, but your ones were a joy to watch and listen to." When I asked what they found so engaging, they elaborated saying that they felt like they got to know me as a real person, not just as lecturer. They felt that this made them more willing to share their own identity.

We made a conscious decision to keep referring to the FoI approach in the remaining units so that it featured as a golden thread throughout the module. For many students the FoI theory appeared in their essays, allowing them to link their own funds to engaging, out of class, educational experiences for primary aged children.

Currently, we hold no quantitative data on the impact that the FoI approach has on relationship-building, connection and belonging; however, in the coming years we hope to measure the role it plays in embedding mental wellbeing in our students. For now, qualitative student feedback is helping us to continue building trusting relationships and increasing engagement and self-esteem levels. As one student recently commented: "I really appreciated the activity you set for the lecture today. I found it very engaging and personalised to me as a learner. For once, I am not overwhelmed by the amount of work. Overall, I have really enjoyed EPL this half term." The only way we can truly be anti-oppressive and fully inclusive in our learning spaces, is if we nurture relationships and self-reflection.

References

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