

Having Presence in a Mathematics Classroom

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This presentation, which is a small part of a main research study, views non-standard trainee teachers' perceptions of 'having presence in a mathematics classroom'

Abstract

The main research study is based on non-standard trainee teachers' constructions of what it is to be a mathematics teacher. The research questions are:

What shifts can be observed in trainee teachers' constructions of what it is to be a maths teacher?

What factors may be said to influence these constructions?

These trainee teachers from a two year B.Ed course in secondary mathematics are mostly from a different cultural and educational background to that of inner London secondary schools.

Olson (1988) recognised the role that teachers' cultures play in what they do in the classroom. He recommended that in order to understand their actions, one needs to interpret the rules they follow. Hoyles claimed that-

"teaching is a 'human' activity which involves the feelings and beliefs of the participants, each of whom have a personal and cultural history colouring their actions."

Hoyles, C.(1992)

If it seems that a teacher's culture and her personal history influence her actions and behaviour in a classroom and it would appear that a trainee teacher's construction of what it is to be a teacher could possibly differ from that of a tutor's construction. A tutor here is taken to include a teacher tutor as well as a university tutor.

The main research study considers several aspects of a trainee teacher's construction of what it is to be a teacher and the methodology consists of several other methods to collect relevant data.

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Data in this instance was collected by semi-structured interviews of three non-standard trainee teachers, three standard trainee teachers, two teachers (ex-students) and four tutors.

The interviewees were asked the following:

'You do not have presence in the classroom.

What does it mean?

Can you evaluate it?

Can you train others at it?

If so, how?'

Results.:

The trainee teachers who had not come from a British cultural and educational background had a rather confused picture of 'not having presence in the classroom'. A few comments in their own words are mentioned briefly:

(a) "No presence' implies 'no character' a feeling of rejection. Felt a failure of no value ... not worth anything. Did not bother to ask what is wrong."

(b) "The notion of having presence in the classroom is quite new to me. "You have to have presence in the classroom to be a good and effective teacher." was said to me, ... not unlike the advice "to enjoy life become a millionaire."

It conjured up in his mind "a picture of an authoritarian individual in Etonian robes with a ruler in his/her hand waving at cowering pupils." The trainee teacher understood that in current terms it meant having total control of the classroom, in other words being in charge.

The reality for the trainee teacher was somewhat vague. The problem for him was not who has presence in the classroom and who does not have it, but *why* some seem to have it and others do not. In his view, "the tutor directives have compounded the confusion: 'Be assertive. Avoid confrontation. Don't shout. '"

A trainee teacher who is of western culture but not acquainted with inner London schools expressed her view:

"When a teacher with her attributes (as a teacher) does not make her presence felt enough, she does not have a positive impact. It has to do with many factors but an experienced teacher manages to neutralise possible disadvantages and be almost the "centre" of a lesson, meaning a very strong reference point to the students".

Interviewees who came from an inner city environment recognised that having presence in a classroom was a multifaceted topic; voice, speech, communication, body language, classroom management, posture, appearance, acting ability and how to avoid confrontation were some of these facets. They also agreed it is far easier to know when someone has "got it" rather than why a person does not have it.

All the interviewees believed that one could be trained to some degree to have presence in the classroom, perhaps with the appropriate guidance;

"If a tutor is able to put herself in a trainee teacher's position then there is a better understanding of her words to the trainee teacher"

Trainee teacher from a non Western culture.

The trainee teachers were being offered sound advice and relevant debriefing. Yet a few of them did not seem to be making satisfactory progress. It seemed to take them much longer to make the necessary adjustments.

Conclusion

Trainee teachers from different cultures and educational backgrounds could have different perceptions and constructions about being a teacher. One needs to be aware of these differences and to be sensitive in dealing with them. Because of the complexity of this issue, it must follow that trainee teachers will achieve "success" in varying ways and in varying periods of time.

Bibliography

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