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Does our preparation of early years students for work-based learning (WBL) align with practitioners' expectations?

Introduction

This briefing paper, written to accompany a presentation given at the TACTYC Annual Conference 2014, is an account of research undertaken by myself and my colleague, Jackie Musgrave, in response to what we could see was a gulf between students and practitioners engaged in work-based learning expectations of one another.

As a state registered nurse and a trained primary school teacher, Jackie and I were committed to the practice and principle of work-based learning, having benefitted from this when we were student practitioners and then subsequently as we mentored students undertaking work-based learning in our institutions post-qualification.

This commitment, based on our personal experience rather than evidence-based research, was upheld as we moved into higher education and we became responsible for the preparation of early childhood studies students in becoming professional practitioners. As we planned programmes that included elements of work-based learning we struggled to find a theoretical framework to guide our planning for student preparation for placement. In particular we sought to answer three research questions:

- How can we prepare students to achieve an outstanding work-based learning experience?
- What peer-to-peer advice do students convey to help less-experienced students in work-based learning?
- What do practitioners value from students when engaged in work-based learning?

Literature Review

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) benchmarks (2014) are elusive in giving definitive guidance for preparing students for work-based learning; for example section 4.5 states that,

“Professional, reflective practice incorporates theoretical principles, working with babies, young children, families and communities...”

It is unclear whether the work with “babies, young children, families and communities” can be purely theoretical or whether a placement experience is extolled. Support of work-based learning is slightly more apparent in section 6.4,

“Approaches to teaching and learning value personal, theoretical and practice-based experiences and explore the ways in which they complement and enrich each other.”

But it is still a little ambiguous as to whether these “practice-based experiences” are to form part of the degree make-up or whether students can draw on previous participation in practice.

The language of the QAA Benchmarks (2014) is phrased carefully in 6.5, stating, “engagement *with* practice is a key feature of approaches to teaching and learning in early childhood studies” as opposed to the definitive “engagement *in* practice”, making it unclear as to whether the “opportunities... provided for students to plan for the curriculum, assessment, evaluation and improvement of creative learning opportunities...” must be conducted in placement or can be merely a desk top activity.

Foundations for Quality (Nutbrown 2012) did include work-based learning within its scope. Several recommendations recognised the significance of work-based learning in early childhood education and care qualifications, for example;

“Practice placements are an essential part of training.... Students need to observe and work alongside practitioners whose practice is high quality.... Only settings that are rated “Good” or “Outstanding” by Ofsted should be able to host students on placement. (p.7).

There was also a recommendation that students should “be experiencing practice in a variety of settings ...so that they can see different ways of working and learn from a variety of expert practitioners” (p.21). Further emphasis on the importance of placements was stressed by the recommendation that this should take place in “at least three different and appropriate settings, to last a total equivalent of a minimum of twenty percent of the total course duration.” (p.23).

Whilst Foundations for Quality (Nutbrown 2012) formalised the general acceptance of the value of work-based learning in the study of early childhood education and care, much of the educational research evidence has focused on the placements of primary and secondary trainee teachers (Macy, Squires and Barton 2009; Moody 2009, cited in Rouse, Morrissey & Rahimi 2011) and there is an absence of evidence-based literature regarding early childhood students’ placement experience (Recchia and Shin 2010, cited in Rouse, Morrissey & Rahimi 2011), or indeed any vocational education or pedagogy, possibly, as suggested by Bamfield (2013) because there is confusion about its objectives .

We believe that this is a situation that needs re-dressing. It has become clear from preparing this paper that there are reciprocal benefits for those who participate in the work-based learning experience, furthering the professional development of both the trainee and those in the workplace (Rawlings 2008).

Methodology

In order to address the research questions posed in the introduction, an action research approach using mixed methods was applied. Action research has the advantage of addressing the question of how to improve practice rather than to generate new knowledge and is flexible enough to be applied in a most situations (Mukherji and Albon 2011). It is clear from analysis of literature regarding practice based learning in nursing (which has a much longer tradition of producing evidence-based research into work-based learning than early childhood) that the issues surrounding work-based learning will never be unequivocally settled “once and for all” because, as the workforce evolves, this will inevitably impact on the work-based learning experience (Jasper 2010).

However, the fact that the research would not produce a definitive answer meant that action research, allowed for the encompassment of “multiple, uncertain and shifting viewpoints”

(Brown and Jones 2001, cited in Mukherji and Albon 2011, p.92); a new cycle of action research would begin in response to new information as necessary.

To address the questions posed in the introduction we undertook a triad approach using the following methods to gather data:

- notes on the feedback audit from placement hosts. Some hosts were re-interviewed and asked to give specific written feedback to support our preparation of students for placement.
- students who were at the end of their degree wrote a “dear student” letter giving advice to new students about to undertake placement.
- student feedback and written work involving placement experience was analysed.

Key themes

From these data collection methods key themes emerged:

- practitioners valued initiative and intuition
- Students sometimes struggled to make the move from pupil to practitioner
- students were unprepared for negotiating work relationships between colleagues in settings

Further analysis of the key themes revealed that there were many overlapping features within these themes. The following sections will address these findings in more detail.

Practitioners valued initiative and intuition

This section could be subdivided into two further themes; those relating to physical work and those relating to raising morale.

Some feedback supported the often cited view that students are “another pair of hands”, implying that work with young children is, in the main, physical. Respect appeared to be

conditional on having the intuition to know when to support the practitioners in these physical duties;

“We have had a lot of students who have just stood. They can see what we’re doing, for example, at lunch time carrying the food to the children, but they don’t offer to help; they have to be prompted.”

This suggests that practitioners have an aversion to being watched, perhaps interpreting this as judgement with a critical eye. Although there was some sympathy for the student position (“they might be thinking that they don’t want to step on our toes”) it could also be perceived that practitioners enter a subconscious contract with students; “we will let you into our setting, with all the vulnerabilities that this may evoke in us, if you demonstrate your acceptance by working hard to integrate yourself in our team.”

“They’ve got to want to be there. If this is the career that they’ve chosen then they’ve got to throw themselves in – it’s a “hands on” job. If they’re not sure what to do then they should ask.”

This quotation from a practitioner seems to imply a need for students to demonstrate commitment without reservation to working in early years. Perhaps this subconsciously reinforces the value of their work to the practitioners themselves and so endorses their choice of career.

Whilst “throwing themselves in” was important to the practitioners, it represented only a minimum requirement in terms of value added by students and offsetting the cost / benefits ratio in terms of feeling judged, balanced against having a slightly easier life with the additional physical labour provided by a student. The balance tipped in the student’s favour if they were able to inspire and enthuse and in doing so, raise morale;

“Students like L.B. are just bursting with ideas. We do the same things day in and day out and it’s so nice to have someone enthusiastic and full of fresh ideas to stimulate the children with the ability to see it through”

However, it was also clear that emotional intelligence was essential for students when considering the timing of introducing new ideas. The following advice was given to students from a setting manager:

“You are welcome to question us and our practices or make suggestions as to how we might improve but please do not be offended if we do not act immediately on your suggestions - remember it takes times to make change and you might just have sown the seed!!”

This ability to interpret mood and other intangible cues has implications for pedagogic practice, suggesting a need to move away from core academic knowledge traditionally prized in English education (Bamfield 2013) to a system where rational and emotional intelligence are also valued (Nutbrown 2012). When considering students through a contemporary lens, it should be borne in mind that this emphasis on academic skills combined with a “culture of intense testing” may have “squeezed out another set of skills – how to think creatively, how to collaborate, how to empathise” (Roberts 2009, cited in Bamfield 2013 p.7) and students may need direct coaching if they are to acquire these skills.

For the student practitioners who successfully combine the lower level physical skills with emotional intelligence there will be a satisfying of the need to be recognised for what they can contribute; they will feel that they have made a difference. This represents a move away from the “worker-as-technician” (Moss 2008, cited in Appleby 2010, p.15) and more towards the ideal advocated by Schön (1983, cited in Bolton 2005) where students are able to adapt their practice in response to changing circumstances.

Students sometimes struggled to make the move from pupil to practitioner

In contrast to the initiative and intuition anticipated by practitioners, young students sometimes struggled to know what was expected of them whilst engaged in work-based learning. One practitioner reported that the student sat down with the children and waited for the snack to be brought to them. Another example was when students were expected to arrange their placement. Using a socio-generational lens it was apparent that there was a generational divide between those who were experienced in using the telephone and those who have had little cause

to use it. We had not anticipated the anxiety caused to students when asked to call a setting on the telephone. A “dear student” letter from a graduating student made this clear;

“Before I started my degree, I had hardly ever phoned somebody for a professional purpose. I was really overwhelmed at the prospect of having to do so; I was really nervous. I would have done anything not to have to make the phone call.”

They were also unsure as to the extent to which they should integrate themselves in the setting;

“As a student I was worried it was not professional or my place to have a sense of humour...”

This may be another manifestation of the emphasis on academic skills and a school system which has succumbed to “a culture of intensive testing” (Roberts 2009, cited in Bamfield 2013 p.7) with the skill of spoken dialogue being “squeezed out”. Research reveals that young students may be so accustomed to texting that the art of having a conversation over the telephone has been lost (Kluger 2012). In aiming to be a “type three” teacher (Biggs and Tang 2007 p.24), where teaching methods are applied wisely to enable student understanding, rather than blame the student for not having this skill, sessions were spent practicing making a professional telephone call.

The student who would have done anything to avoid making the call (above) felt sufficiently empowered having taken part in the practice sessions to write a “Dear Student” letter giving tips for success to new students. This suggests that direct coaching can have an impact on preparing students for a positive experience.

Students were unprepared for negotiating work relationships between colleagues in settings

“In early years settings it is not uncommon to come across hurtful gossip, unkind humour, subtle insults, “tiny lies” or omissions of truth and covert pecking orders” (Rodd 2006, p.73).

For many new students placement is their first experience in an educational environment where they are not the pupils. Although they will have probably been in situations where there was tension between the adults teaching them, it is probable that this will have gone unnoticed. If any tension in relationships was detected they are unlikely to wonder whether this is because of something they have done. However, as the quotation from Rodd above shows, early years settings can be minefields in terms of dysfunctional relationships and, without preparing students for how to handle these situations, they may become despondent and disengaged when on placement.

To prepare students for the realities of collaborative working with colleagues, students were encouraged to consider the situation from the perspective of those working in the setting, using practitioner feedback;

“When you are acting “in loco parentis” every day it’s like you’re all parents of the children in the setting. It’s no wonder conflicts arise because if you disagree with how someone treats a child, it can feel quite personal because it’s like an implicit challenge to the way they were brought up or are bringing up their children.”

Case studies offered by graduating students, as well as an understanding of the theory of team formation, were also used to prepare students.

Discussion

It was clear that there was a cultural and generational divide between many practitioners and student practitioners going into placement. The emphasis on learning for testing inherent in the English school system, reinforced since the 1990’s (Roberts 2009, cited in Bamfield 2013), may have “squeezed out space for developing the wider range of skills vital for life and work in the twenty-first century” (Bamfield 2013 p.5). Because many senior practitioners are from a previous generation it is likely that they did not experience this type of education themselves and therefore have unrealistic expectations of students. Whilst this paper has focused on the need to prepare students to meeting these expectations, more work is necessary on how to manage the expectations of the practitioners themselves.

Implications for pedagogical practice

The opposite of “competence” is “incompetence”. However, Race (2007) created the term “uncompetence” to mean “not-yet-competent” (p.17) and developed a model exploring how we can support students to gain competence. This was a useful model in guiding our students for placement. The table below is a summary of the process:

Unconscious incompetence	Students are unaware of what they do not know about undertaking a successful placement. They need information about what they do not know they cannot do.
Conscious incompetence	Students are aware of what they do not know about placement; knowing what they do not know about placement is an essential step towards becoming proficient.
Conscious competence	When criteria for a successful placement experience are made clear, students may be able to move from conscious incompetence to competence without help. However, opportunities to discuss placement experience with tutors or peers can be beneficial to students as they make this transition.
Unconscious competence	Students have become so practiced in their placement that they are effortlessly competent. These students are in a better position to build up their confidence and exercise reflective practice.

Conclusion

The action research undertaken to prepare for this paper has enabled us to work through the above model with the students. Being aware of the gap between student and practitioner expectations regarding the placement experience has meant that we can anticipate and enable students to navigate their way through more competently.

In practice this has meant helping students complete a skills audit based on the professional standards of Early Years Educator (DfE 2014), as well as stressing the importance of a list when planning their placement tasks. A review of the Practice Based Learning Handbook addressing the issues raised from this research was also undertaken and shared with students to support their preparation for work-based learning.

Whilst it is impossible to anticipate every placement scenario, it is hoped that students are better prepared than they were before for an outstanding work-based learning experience as they follow the sound advice created following this research.

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