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Effect on students from attending a university degree programme run in partnership with further and higher education institutions.

Abstract

This paper considers the effect on students from attending a university Foundation Degree programme delivered in partnership with six further education teaching institutions in England. The programme is situated within the early childhood education sector using an instructional design which promotes higher-level learning within the teaching institution and the workplace. Learning in one environment is aligned to the other. The research process actively involved students and was conducted within ethical parameters approved by a university ethics committee. A qualitative methodology examined data drawn from focus groups, an online survey and content analysis. Programme effect was seen as enhancing personal and professional capability and promoting higher order learning. The findings go some way towards theorisation and documentation of programme effect by identifying the influence of instructional design and extends knowledge about aligning the pace of teaching and learning with professional practice.

Key Words: Foundation Degree, Professional Knowledge, Professional Capability Instructional Design, Reflective Practice, Student Engagement

Introduction

University derived degree programmes for Early Childhood Education and Care, (ECEC) are intended to contribute to high-quality services and outcomes for children and families (OECD 2006; 2011; 2012). This is a process intended to empower learners to develop knowledge as part of self-regulated professionally aligned instruction (Fleet and Patterson 2001). It is also intended to produce a positive effect on professional capability and professional identity; evidence of which can be seen from a meta-analysis of professional development programmes (Ortlipp, Aurther, and Woodrow 2011; Sheridan et al 2009) as well as reviews of vocational degree programmes (Knight et al 2006). The success of these programmes may involve adopting different instructional designs, and course pedagogy and each may have access to different resources. They adhere to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA, Quality Code, 2014) which is the definitive reference point for all higher education providers. It makes clear what higher education providers are required to do, and what the public can expect of them. A common feature for vocational degrees involves learning within a Higher Education institution (HEI) which is then aligned with and made responsive to practice (Nutbrown 2012). Such programmes involve Foundation Degrees in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) which are often led by universities in partnership with further education colleges. This involves collaborative course design, shared pedagogical processes and a content base that allows sharing of skills and expertise between students and tutors. There are also national

policy dimensions particular to early education which influence the design of any programme. This involves being responsive to practice-led regulatory requirements which place an emphasis on collaborative working, the need for educators to possess a comprehensive knowledge of the curriculum as well as developing the ability to recognise and improve what are considered to be key features of effective early education, identified by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted 2015).

In addition, the programme should address wider factors, such as aligning the chronology and pace of the course to the changing landscape of the early childhood sector to meet economic and social demands (Parker 2013; Maplethorpe et al 2010; Miller and Cable 2011). It is also important to develop personal and professional qualities necessary to improve practice such as professional integrity, collaborative working and leading and influencing practice. This involves understanding deeper multidimensional personal attributes and qualities, such as reflecting on practice and critically interpreting and reinterpreting what is useful in order to influence practice (Callan, Reed, and Smith 2012). This is a process which requires students to consider what they have been taught, engage with others and inquire into educational practice. In particular, when they ask questions about the identity and values they observe in practice and ask what can be done to build upon and extend children's learning. This is because any incursion into an organisation touches the whole learning environment. In which case it can be argued that an influence on practice emerges when students become aware of the multiple relations of professional expertise, ethical and moral practices, power and perceptions of quality as they align their learning with practice (Cumming, Sumison, and Wong 2013; Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Penn 2011; Moss 2008; Reed 2012; Reed and Walker 2015). Therefore the programme design requires a pedagogy and a variety of approaches which are flexible and adaptable (Morrison et al. 2010). The key question is whether the instructional design and the programme learning environment has influenced meaningful change in practitioners' skills, behaviours and dispositions (Sheridan et al 2009; Wareing, Chadwick and Baggs 2014).

Research aims

To reveal the views of students about personal and professional effect of a programme of university derived training presented in partnership with a number of further and higher education colleges.

The programme under review

A Foundation Degree (Early Education) delivered in partnership with a university in central England and six partner Further Education Colleges in the region, situated in nine separate campuses. It offers a variety of modes of learning, including an online blended learning route delivered centrally from the university. The programme runs over three years part-time, two full-time and offers evening and day attendance. Students are employed or on placement in professional early education settings in socially diverse urban and rural locations. Internal and

external institutional review processes confirm the programme meets national quality requirements, is well managed and addresses the needs of students and employers. Completion of the programme provides progression on to a number of BA (Hons) Top up degrees and thereafter suitable candidates may progress on to professional graduate qualifications. The programme is inclusive in accommodating different abilities, cultural heritages, social background and faiths. It has a particular feature intended to increase collaborative engagement between the university, and partner colleges. This takes the form of a conference held twice in the academic year. The conference is professionally organised with invited keynote speakers and workshops. It allows all students and tutors come together in order to share expertise and focus on common themes related to the programme. As the course progresses students are exposed to the content of a variety of practice-led modules which require students to reflect on practice: a process which is based on the original work of Schon (1987) who saw reflection on practice as a means to shape ideas for practice. His influence is significant and is used as source material on the programme. Students consider how he saw reflection as more than simply accepting information and how reflection is an essential component of critically examining practice and a way of giving people the confidence to ask questions about the practice they shape and build. Therefore students are encouraged to reflect on what constitutes quality practice as well as wider perspectives such as professional ethics, child agency and regulatory policy (Hanson and Appleby 2015). It underpins a pattern of learning which involves students in exploring, refining, developing, reflecting and influencing practice and producing knowledge (Healey et al 2013; Solvason, 2015; Reed and Walker 2014, Hanson and Appleby 2015). Such an approach invests time in students making choices, developing reflection and allowing self-confidence to emerge. The aim is to deepen a consideration of practice and ways to refine practice through professional inquiry (Ioannidou-Koutselini and Patsalidou, 2015). It is a pedagogy which requires a positive interaction between tutors and students and recognises learners' involvement in the education process, by facilitating choice making and thus provides a 'momentum to learn' (Knowles, 1990, 1). Figure (1) is a grid intended to illustrate what can be described as patterns of learning on the programme. The horizontal axes show the estimated student learning experience, which underpins the way theory is aligned with practice, active participation in practice and the ability to become a self-organised learner. The vertical axes show estimated patterns of learning through programme content, transferable learning, understanding of quality practice and the importance of personal and professional reflection. Assessment and learning are interconnected via formative learning activities which encourages the development of higher order learning. This involves the assimilation and analysis of information.

(Figure 1 to be placed here.)

Text continues after figure 1

The research design

Student participation was voluntary and the research process ran over one academic year. The intention was to engage students in more than a summative evaluation of the programme. This

necessitated re-establishing the process with students as they regrouped after vacation periods. Three staff members took the lead in coordinating the research process and gathering data was conducted by 14 members of the university and partner college academic staff. The methodology therefore adopted a qualitative collaborative approach (Reason and Riley 2008; Donohoo, 2011). Regular meetings were held to ensure consistency of approach and to contribute to an interpretive analysis of findings. Students were aware of the aims of the research which was conducted within ethical parameters approved by a university ethics committee. In terms of appropriate methods to gather data, the intention was to ask students to consider the extent to which they consider themselves to have gained knowledge and developed personal and professional skills related to course effect. Methods involved an initial online survey/questionnaire, open to all students; focus groups located in each partner college and groups held at the partnership conference, open to all students. This equated to ten focus groups containing representatives from all the partner colleges. The content analysis involved scrutiny of final year students' summative practice-led inquiries, to gauge information about the influence of their work on personal and professional practice.

The online survey meant views were anonymous and the process was intended to gain honest reflections on course effect. Questions asked included:

What stage are you at within the degree programme?

What effect has the course had upon your professional practice?

What effect has the course had upon your personal professional development?

What do you think you have personally achieved/gained as a result of the course?

The focus groups were intended to establish collective meanings about what prompted course effect on learning and professional practice, within a safe environment so as to allow a sharing of experiences and promote free and uninhibited discussion (Barbour 2005). The researchers were aware that being face-to-face with other students and tutors could limit attendance and inhibit views being expressed. However, demand to participate meant that a number of additional groups were arranged and views were clearly and vociferously expressed. This allowed a comparison of emerging themes between groups. Summative student assignments were subjected to content analysis in order to consider the use of critical thinking and to identify themes from the course which were seen as relevant to practice. Each researcher who participated in the content analysis process was given specific instruction on which issues to identify and to record information on a reduction grid indicating the source and specific issue identified. These were analysed in terms of volume (how many times students mentioned a specific feature) and were also interrogated in terms of views on effect on practice. This allowed a consideration of the way theoretical perspectives had been transposed into practice and how one informed the other. The data allowed collective and individual higher learning skills to be made visible in terms of synthesis, analysis and reflection and the way the process of inquiry and reflection had an effect on learning and practice. Each of the sources exposed the views of students and the extent to which they consider themselves to have gained knowledge and developed skills at a number of points throughout the programme. The final analysis of accumulated data used representational grids to examine and reduce information from each data source in order to allow scrutiny and interpretation within and between the data.

Findings

Representing key issues

The key elements which emerged from the collective data are shown by Figure (2). These represent patterns of effect drawn from descriptors of what students felt were the personal and professional qualities they exhibited.

(Figure 2 to be placed here.)

Text continues after figure 2

Instructional design and pace of the course

Data from each of the sources identified how the programme provided an alignment between theory and practice and this was seen as a positive effect of the instructional design. This alignment was seen by students as cumulative as the programme moved forward and being of value personally and professionally. For example, a member of a focus group said ‘The course has made me feel more confident in my practice as it is applicable to ‘real’ life.’ Another member illustrates the alignment of theory to practice over time:

Being able to reflect on modules and content including quality improvement, quality of observation, leadership and regulations benefits practice. For inexperienced students, this is less obvious early on in the course, but later they find themselves contributing to a wave of change and leading by example.

Data from the focus groups and from the content analysis also revealed issues about the pace of the programme in terms of its gradual effect on practice and the way students were incrementally influencing and shaping practice.

I changed the routine from a timetabled one to free flow; that was from learning about High Scope. I thought children needed more choice and a voice

As a manager, I think that students need to make suggestions sensitively and at a pace the setting can find helpful

Students residing in the second semester of their degree indicated how they were developing underpinning knowledge and theory to give confidence to their daily practice. In contrast, students towards the end of their studies said that the true effect did not occur until the final semester of the degree when all their learning came together. This provided valuable information which will inform the future instructional design of the programme. In particular the way programme learning activities should focus more clearly on learning over time.

It became clear that students placed a high value on consistency of approach between the partner institutions, for example, the importance of ethical practice and the value of reflective

engagement with colleagues was seen throughout the partner institutions. Less clear was the value of the student conferences as a distinct feature of the course, but when asked what features tended to promote confidence and the ability to share information; the partnership conferences were seen as facilitating these qualities. The following are two examples which illustrate confidence and collaboration with colleagues: ‘The views of others have taught me a great deal about my own practice’ and:

The course has developed a shift in my thinking, I am now more reflective and critical. It has made us (colleagues in the setting) reflect on our work and everything we read and do – it has built knowledge and confidence

Programme effect: personal and professional development

The data indicated increased confidence both personal and professional. This was a feature that emerged from all of the data sources and often expressed in terms of professional confidence accompanied by growth in professional knowledge, professional capability or by their reflection on an aspect of practice. For example, a significant number of online survey respondents indicated an increased understanding of child development which enhanced professional practice. They also indicated how an increased understanding of regulatory requirements, the curriculum and workplace policy did have an influence on their practice.

Focus group data indicated that many participants did not wish to separate personal and professional confidence as they felt that one was interconnected with the other. For example, a gain in terms of confidence was expressed as enhanced understanding, or as a growing sense of ‘being confident’ because of being asked an opinion in practice – both influencing professional capability. For some this was clearly linked to changes in their own learning, of becoming more critical, reflective and as having a better basis for making judgements. It was also seen as being within an environment where students trust others on the course and that trust was seen as important and allowed views to be freely exchanged. In terms of confidence having an influence on practice this was primarily seen as understanding the importance of children’s learning and feeling confident that an approach introduced on the course could be applied in the workplace and having the confidence to explain *why* it was valuable for practice. For some this increased knowledge was seen as being able to effectively meet the requirements of external regulatory inspections of early education settings. For example, a focus group response indicated: ‘When Ofsted inspected my setting, I was able to explain why I am doing things. I feel I am able to better explain what I am doing now.’ For others, enhanced confidence was seen as the ability to critically evaluate practice. It was often expressed as appreciating the child’s perspective and those of parents and colleagues. It was also expressed as being more confident in reshaping the children’s learning or planning and working with parents. Students perceived this as the course having an effect on quality improvement because they were acquiring knowledge and had confidence in the veracity of that knowledge. This led them to construct knowledge which was assimilated and articulated as having an impact for practice

and in practice. The words used to reflect professional qualities and actions on figure (1) give weight to this view. These terms were more apparent in the content analysis of student writing where they perhaps thought carefully about the images they wished to convey about their work in practice. To what extent the course had therefore raised the professional status of students in the community was not expressed directly in those terms, however many respondents reported feeling more confident and more valued (by other colleagues and parents) since studying on the programme.

Course effect on Practice

Students highlighted the importance of the programme developing an alignment to practice. What was interesting within this response (in all of the focus groups) was how learning and teaching involved analysis and discussion of real life practice-led situations and through the opportunity to share practice-led experiences with others. This was seen as important and students were able to give examples where this had improved practice. For example, a student in the focus group reported that: 'the research model is giving me the chance to look at an area in more depth e.g. children's writing. I feel I am really looking at children's work.' Other examples included having an effect on both day-to-day process interactions with children and families and structural aspects, such as policy development and a response to meeting the requirements of external inspection processes. It seemed that students placed effect on practice in the forefront of nearly all of the responses within each of the data sources. It appeared that the programme was successful in aligning study with practice, but it was the ability of the practitioners/students to perceive and articulate that link which was important. For example, understanding what is meant by quality early education practice and perceiving quality as multidimensional and not just resting with regulation. This was more than an alignment with practice; it became more to do with enhanced understanding, making changes as a result of learning and developing with others and 'informed shared consent' to move forward. This revealed the way that knowledge, professional capability and reflection on practice were used interchangeably and emerged as transferable skills. In effect, this is a means to take learning and apply it to other situations. It is best illustrated by a comment which represented many of the views expressed: 'I was able to view things from different perspectives, including the child and others in the setting and beyond.'

Transformational

The data suggests the programme was transformational. For example, the survey allowed rich data to emerge about the level of engagement with the programme and how many students suggested such engagement resulted in an effect both personally and professionally. Focus groups provided a view of how the programme had an effect emotionally as they gained confidence, applied new skills and had allowed them to articulate an impact on the lives of the children and families. In terms of progression and preferment, there was specific mention of the way the programme facilitated leadership roles and access to further study. It was also clear that the course provided an impetus for a deeper consideration about the interactions between people, the setting and the community and exposed the values of the setting as it often asked that a student perceive what goes on through the eyes of others. It also prompted questions which could be transposed into practice and these often touched the real world in which people

operate. A world which for those most closely involved represents a professional culture based upon a history of important experiences and this makes up a shared educational landscape. Sometimes the course helped to reshape that landscape as it allowed transformative ideas to be developed safely in the company of trusted others.

Limitations

The research is not intended to reveal applicability for other institutions or to be replicable. However, it may be seen as informing a first phase investigation into practice using methods which allowed themes to emerge that are relevant to understanding course effect. In terms of its contribution to practice it may be useful in allowing students to consider their own learning aligned with professional expectation. This allows them to reflect upon the positive experiences they may be experiencing and act as a mechanism to chart their professional journey. Future research may require a deeper approach to establish relationships between themes and the way specific modular elements of the programme vary in terms of effect on students and an influence on practice. The aim would be to identify longer term impact on practice for example, gathering data from the other partners involved in the educational process such as parents, leaders, administrators and involved professionals.

Discussion

Student perception of programme effect was seen in terms of personal and professional capability and the way higher order learning was aligned with reflection on practice, in practice and for practice. The findings do not present a picture of uncertainty about professional role and identity nor were the views tentative about programme effect, especially in terms of personal and professional confidence. To what extent this was influenced by the programme facilitating choice, developing reflection and allowing self-confidence to emerge is uncertain though there was a clear view of how alignment between programme content and practice appeared to deepen a consideration of practice and ways to refine practice (Ioannidou-Koutselini and Patsalidou, 2015). This appeared to develop reflection on not only what was possible but what might be possible. As to whether this represents learning how to learn (Knowles, 1990) is not clear, but it is evident that student engagement in the programme was high. The instructional design of the programme was intended to develop higher order learning aligned with reflection on practice and students seemed to think this was the case. The operational design allowed students to recognise a consistent approach to learning and teaching across the partnership.

Conclusion

The research has shown programme effect on students. It has allowed student professional identity and voice to emerge. The findings go some way towards theorisation and documentation of programme effect by identifying the influence of instructional design and identifies possibilities for moving beyond student satisfaction gained from individual module survey responses. It extends knowledge about aligning the pace of teaching and learning with professional capability in practice.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Figure (1)

<i>Patterns of Learning</i>	<i>Provided with a structure for learning</i>	<i>Guided and supported to explore practice</i>	<i>Active participation</i>	<i>Self-organised learning</i>	<i>Self-organised Learner</i>
<i>Learning through practice</i>	<i>Knowledge for learning – the value of collaboration</i>	<i>Testing out in practice</i>	<i>Professional learning in practice</i>	<i>Reflection on own learning</i>	<i>Reflection on effect of the process, personally and professionally</i>
<i>Learning through programme content</i>	<i>Understanding and developing the scope of the module</i>	<i>Considering the scope and range with others in, practice</i>	<i>Developing professional capability</i>	<i>Forming ideas and reflecting on what has been found</i>	<i>Reflecting: wider effects on children and families</i>
<i>Transferable learning</i>	<i>Clarifying, and sourcing information and planning</i>	<i>Negotiating and operating in the company of others.</i>	<i>Evaluating reflecting organising and analysing material.</i>	<i>Information drawn together and shared with others.</i>	<i>Reflection: Progression to further learning opportunities.</i>
<i>Learning about quality practice</i>	<i>Recognises features of quality practice and potential for shaping change</i>	<i>Explores opportunities and constraints with others of regulation and policy</i>	<i>Identifies influence of structural and process features</i>	<i>Perceives interrelationship between structural and process features</i>	<i>Reflection on practice and shaping/refining practice</i>

<i>Personal and professional reflection</i>	<i>Explores ethicality, own and professional values</i>	<i>Able to see issues through the eyes of others</i>	<i>Questions what goes on - seeing things differently</i>	<i>Ask questions. Considers the influence of self on practice.</i>	<i>Ask questions wider than the here and now</i>
<i>Assessment and learning</i>	<i>Formative engagement and practising via study skills</i>	<i>Formative learning activities</i>	<i>Formative learning activities in practice</i>	<i>Preparation for written and other representation for assessment.</i>	<i>Self-organised assessment and contribution to student conferences</i>
<i>Professional skills</i>	<i>Learner, planner, thinker, sharer</i>	<i>Communicator and listener and sharer</i>	<i>Collaborator and reflective investigator and sharer</i>	<i>Leader, Shaper, evaluator and sharer</i>	<i>Reflective practitioner</i>

Figure (2) Patterns of effect on practice, in practice and for practice.

Patterns of effect	On practice	In practice	For practice
Instructional design	<i>Able to acquire knowledge and align theory with practice – understands pace of learning and action in practice</i>	<i>Possibility of change and pace of change when engaging in any refinement of practice</i>	<i>Understands which aspects of policy and practice may be refined and why</i>
Professional confidence	<i>Challenges personal and professional values, beliefs. Able to see issues through the eyes of others.</i>	<i>Asking questions that touch the organisation – able to consider what is happening and the implications/consequences/pace</i>	<i>Reflection on the process (what went on) when shaping/refining practice</i>
Professional capability	<i>Forming ideas and reflecting on what has been found. Exploring opportunities and constraints. Recognising the features of quality practice.</i>	<i>Developing professional capability by exploring and evaluating practice. Identifying links between wider policy and regulation and day-to-day practice</i>	<i>Reflection on personal professional development. Understanding change the importance of keeping up to date, impact of Government policy</i>

<p>Qualities and higher learning professional skills</p>	<p><i>Developing as an inquirer, planner, thinker negotiator communicator and listener.</i></p> <p><i>Classifying, describing, discussing, planning, explaining, identifying, selecting and interpreting.</i></p>	<p><i>Developing as an inquirer, planner, thinker negotiator diplomat, communicator, listener collaborator and reflective investigator.</i></p> <p><i>Classifying, describing, discussing, planning, explaining, identifying, indicating, recognising selecting interpreting, appraising assessing, evaluating, predicting, co-ordinating, developing, modifying, adapting, changing, reflecting, considering, re-arranging and applying.</i></p>	<p><i>Applying professional qualities as an inquirer, planner, thinker negotiator communicator, listener collaborator, leader, shaper and reflective questioner.</i></p> <p><i>Classifying, proposing, describing, discussing, planning, explaining, identifying, indicating, recognising selecting interpreting, appraising assessing, evaluating, predicting, demonstrating, refining, changing, adjusting, reviewing, collecting, constructing, creating, and drawing together.</i></p>
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