An Evaluation of a workshops-based intervention designed to develop the confidence of women students in managing communications with parents and carers

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Abstract

The demographic comprising Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) students remains highly gendered. Evidence suggests that women educators may have lower levels of perceived self-efficacy than their male counterparts. This small-scale research project aimed to evaluate the impact of workshops co-constructed with undergraduate women. The workshops aimed to support their developing confidence in managing communications with parents and carers of children in ECEC. The UK's QAA (2014) benchmarks for Early Childhood Studies degrees require students to act as advocates for children, their parents and families but initial findings suggested that students lacked confidence in their abilities to do this, even avoiding opportunities where they arose.

The research adopted a social constructivist, feminist perspective. Qualitative methods were employed to collect, analyse and evaluate findings. The findings supported the notion of the affective as a potential barrier to learning. It is contended that such a barrier might be mitigated by learning and teaching strategies which acknowledge explicitly socio-cultural, structural and affective barriers to the advancement of women and girls and their potential effect on confidence and perception of self-efficacy. This is particularly pertinent to courses which comprise almost all women students many of whom will contribute to future generations' education of women and girls.

Introduction

This paper concerns an evaluation of an intervention which comprised eight non-assessed workshops which were embedded in an optional Level 4 module on the BA course, Early Childhood Professional Practice in the Centre for Children and Families at the University of Worcester. The module, 'Parents and Professionals, Positive Relationships' was led by the researcher author. The indicative content of the Module Specification (Institute of Education, 2014) identifies 'collaborative working' and 'partnership working with parents and children' as skills to be acquired. The impetus for the intervention stemmed from student anecdotal feedback that, although professional practice experience is embedded in the course through placements in a range of early childhood settings, students lacked opportunities to engage with parents and develop experience to support their theoretical knowledge. They reported that they lacked opportunities to develop skills both as a result of their status as students and because of a lack of confidence in their own abilities to manage interactions with parents and carers.

The intervention aimed to strengthen opportunities for students to rehearse communication skills in order to support their understanding of, and confidence in, managing communications with parents. The effectiveness of the intervention was evaluated using students' perceptions.

The values which underpinned the intervention included a commitment to equality of opportunity for learners. The cohort on this module were all young and all women. Feelings of "not being good enough" are particularly common amongst female students and age and gender discrimination remain endemic in western culture (Morgan, 2015). The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) subject specific benchmarks (2014, p.11) require graduates of Early Childhood Studies to 'give voice to and where appropriate act as an advocate for babies, young children, families and communities'. It struck the author that in order to become effective advocates on behalf of others, students must find and value their own voices.

Literature review

This literature review considers relevant policy and theory in respect of learning and teaching in Higher Education (H.E) with a focus on potential barriers to learning and teaching strategies which informed the andragogic approach to the intervention. Andragogy, can be defined as a student-led approach which acknowledges that adult learners have valuable experience which informs their own and others' learning. Reed and Walker (2015, p.251) point out that this approach is 'more self-directed and autonomous' than instructional pedagogy.

The University of Worcester Learning and Teaching Strategy (2015-2018 p.1) Mission Statement states that students should 'become self-confident, active citizens who participate fully in society'. Therefore, andragogy should optimise student participation and the development of dispositions and skills which enable this. Identification of features which limit participation enables strategies which may help mitigate or remove them.

The QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Early Childhood Studies (2014) identifies engagement with practice as a key feature of such courses. 'They also provide opportunities for students to lead, support and work collaboratively with others and an understanding of working effectively in teams with parents, carers and other professionals' (QAA, 2014, p.12). Close scrutiny of this statement reveals an implicit acknowledgement that opportunities to work *directly* with parents may not be available. This begs the question as to how students can develop their inter-personal skills in respect of managing sometimes sensitive and difficult situations. The recognition of this difficulty is reflected by the QAA (2013, p.37) who report that, 'developing knowledge and skills from a course was posited as a prerequisite for entry into a career route, particularly pre-professional and vocationally-oriented courses (e.g. teaching, social work).' They note that experience and skills were not 'easily garnered' from degree studies (QAA, 2103, p.39).

The fact that the students who comprised the module cohort were all women is unsurprising. Early Childhood Studies can be seen as highly gendered. Fuller (2016, p.12) argues that women are subject to ‘a subversive cultural hegemony’, one that suggests ‘freedom to be’ via education without offering ‘freedom from’ gendered norms and expectations. Bowler (1999, p.10) argues that ‘women’s exclusion from the ideal of reason has rested on their association with emotion, nature, and passive subordination’ This stereotype of women’s essential nature is compounded by structural inequalities within the ECEC profession which is overwhelmingly female and where pay, working conditions and status remain below those employed in other phases of education. Fuller (2016, p.12), questions the role of HE in promoting equality as ‘educationally women have greater attainment and access than ever before but still appear to face challenge when attempting to seek parity in the selves they strive to be’. Beard, Smith and Clegg, (2007, p.250) argue that recognition of the affective is a neglected area of research in H.E. and suggest that:

> ‘If students can recognise the ways in which these aspects of their lives impact on their engagement in pedagogical spaces, and if they have a language to think through them and describe them, it seems likely that students can develop a better understanding of the energies and challenges involved in coming to terms with studying’.

Therefore, it is necessary to adopt andragogy, which acknowledges the socio-cultural climate in which the educative experience is situated and its potential impact by exploring the influence of social issues explicitly and supporting reflection and metacognition in students. Bandura (1994, p.2) defines perceived self -efficacy as, ‘people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave.’ Kass (2015) criticises Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy for its failure to recognise the influence of gender, in that women are more likely to have a poor sense of self-efficacy. In support of this contention, she cites Klassen and Chiu’s (2010) research

which found that female teachers had ‘lower classroom management self-efficacy’ than males (Kass, 2015, p.490).

According to Gibson-Beverley and Shwartz (2008, p.120) ‘women may be more likely than men to experience the phenomenon of IP [Imposter Syndrome] because of the impact of gender role stereotypes and early socialisation’. Imposter syndrome was identified by Clance and Imes (1978, p. 241) as ‘an internal experience of intellectual phoniness which appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a select sample of achieving women’. The suggestion that women may tend to lack self-confidence was borne out by the self-audits at the start of the module where a lack of confidence was a dominant theme.

I have sought to establish by reference to the literature that there may be a tension between the professional roles of aspiring practitioners as ‘self-confident, active citizens who participate fully in society’ (UW L&T strategy 2015-18) and young women students’ perceptions of self-efficacy due to internalised social and cultural norms to which they are subject.

A further issue pertinent to the intervention is that of experiential learning. This can be defined as, ‘the sense-making process of active engagement between the inner world of the person and the outer world of the environment’ (Beard and Wilson, 2006, p. 19). That actual experience of the subject of enquiry is necessary to effect learning has long been recognised in education from Aristotle (322-384 B.C) to Dewey (1859-1952). Kolb (1984, p. 38) explains that, ‘Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.’ Given the lack of opportunity to engage with parents in practice, there was a potential disconnect between theory and practice in the module. The design of the intervention was a direct response to this issue.

The intervention comprised a series of eight workshops. Their design was informed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci, 2000), which identifies three universal psychological conditions for intrinsic motivation: autonomy, relatedness and competence.

Deci and Ryan define autonomy as acting ‘volitionally, with a sense of choice’ (2008, p.15) and distinguish this from independence which can be understood as acting alone. According to this theory, where the inter-personal context is ‘informational and supportive’ as opposed to ‘administered in a controlling context’ intrinsic motivation is increased (Deci and Ryan, 2008). Relatedness can be defined as ‘the need to feel belongingness or connectedness with others’ (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The three conditions are inter-related and interdependent so that social-contextual events are conducive to feelings of competence which can enhance intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000). Lyness, et al. (2013) provide a helpful summary reproduced at Table 1. in respect of examples of the application of SDT in learning and teaching in Higher Education.

Basic psychological needs		
Autonomy	**Competence**	**Relatedness**
• Take others’ perspectives • Provide choices • Provide a meaningful rationale when choices cannot be offered • Minimize controlling words	• Set an optimal level of challenge • Support the skills development necessary to meet the posed challenge • Give meaningful feedback framed positively toward the achievement of competence	• Acknowledge feelings and convey empathy • Create structures to foster individual connections • Create structures to foster group and community connections

Table 1 Approaches to foster the three basic psychological needs as articulated by self-determination theory

Lyness, et al. (2013, p.3)

By adopting strategies informed by SDT, including those suggested by Lyness et al. (2013), it was anticipated that levels of active participation in workshops would be increased and this would impact positively on levels of self-confidence as well as providing experience which mirrored actual interactions with parents and carers.

Hodgkins and Watson, (2017) suggest that effective pedagogy in ECEC mirrors that of Andragogy in HE in that both emphasis the need for learners to become capable and confident in supportive learning environments. Claxton and Carr, (2004 p. 91) characterise such environments as those which 'involve frequent participation in shared activity in which children or students take responsibility for directing those activities, as well as adults'. It is incumbent upon teachers in HE to model practice, in their andragogy which they require students to apply to their Early Years practice.

The concept of a 'Community of Practice' (CoP), has its roots in social learning systems theory and comprises personal *experience* and social *competence* (Wenger, 2000). The perceived competence of others within a social learning system 'pulls our experience' (Wenger, 2000, p.227). This theory informed the establishment of ground-rules and modes of engagement.

Methodology

The Methodology outlines the broad philosophical approach to the research before identifying exemplars of how the intervention was informed by literature, theory and practice.

The intervention was informed by a social constructivist approach to learning. Educational theory and practice in the U.K. has been greatly influenced by constructivist theorists such as Piaget (1896- 1980), Vygotsky (1896 – 1934) and Bruner (1915- 2015). According to social constructivist theory, learning takes place in collaboration with others and knowledge is socially constructed within a specific cultural context, (Vygotsky, 1978). This perspective has the advantage in terms of andragogy of framing the learner as an active participant in the educational endeavour.

The content of the workshops is set out in Appendix 1. Prior to the workshops, all students had completed a self-audit of their own skills. This revealed two dominant themes: a lack of confidence and a lack of opportunity to engage with parents.

In Workshop 1, a Community of Practice (CoP) was established (Wenger, 2000) by explicit teaching of CoP theory followed by students co-constructing their own terms of engagement; negotiating, clarifying and evaluating their shared and competing priorities and these were crystallised into a Power Point slide by them only when consensus was reached. In order to optimise their feelings of autonomy and connectedness (Ryan and Deci, 2000) students were asked to reflect upon, then specify scenarios which might cause them particular anxiety. Subsequently, role plays were written which reflected these scenarios. For example, Workshop 7 concerned meeting with parents whose child had been bitten. Critical examination of strategies was explored and related to theory on maintaining professional boundaries MacNaughton and Hughes, (2011). Every workshop activity focused upon a discrete theme and was related to theory, specific skill development and metacognition.

Ethics

To ensure that the research was ethically robust the following protocols were put in place:

- Students were presented with an information sheet explaining the aims of the research. It was made clear that participation was entirely voluntary and not connected to participation in the module or workshops.
- Anonymity of questionnaire responses was ensured by methods of collection and coding of responses.
- Interviewees were selected on the basis of explicit ‘first come, first served’ to ensure parity of opportunity all students in relation to the research
- No inducements were given to students to participate although it was suggested that responses might inform the 500-word critical reflection which was a mandatory

appendix to the summative assignment. This meant that those who chose to complete the questionnaire or take part in interviews were not burdened by further work at a time of competing academic demands. Indeed, all aspects of the intervention were designed to complement the student experience.

- The research complied with the University of Worcester Ethics Policy and the British Educational Research Association (2011) ethical guidelines.

Methods

Three data collection tools were used:

- Questionnaires
- Semi-structured interviews
- Documentary evidence

The questionnaire addressed the following themes:

- Participants' **levels of confidence in** communicating with parents before and after the module workshops
- **Identification** of communication skills as a result of module workshops
- **Effectiveness** of skills rehearsal within module workshops in enhancing communication skills
- **Development** of communication skills as a result of module workshops

The remaining open questions aimed to elicit subjective responses not anticipated by the targeted questions and so optimise the range of data.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to add to qualitative data obtained from questionnaires. The questions addressed the same themes identified above but afforded the opportunity to widen the range of data further by inviting detail and elaboration from participants. In addition, they provided an alternative source of data to enable

comparison with the data questionnaires and an opportunity to triangulate findings (Denscombe, 2010).

Data from Module evaluations for 2015-16 (the previous year) and 2016-17 (year in which the research took place) were compared and used to facilitate triangulation.

Data analysis

The data was transcribed verbatim and none was discarded. This was to minimise the possibility of bias in the selection or expression of data. Firstly, data sources were analysed separately before being triangulated to identify congruence or divergence. I employed the method of content analysis, (Cohen, Manion and Morrison,2007; Denscombe, 2010) which can be defined as ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts’ (Krippendorp (2004, p.18) cited by Cohen et.al (2010, p.475). Terms used by participants were organised into taxonomies which related to the research questions. Preserving participants’ chosen terminology aimed to avoid bias in data analysis.

Miles, Huberman and Saldana, (2014, p. 179) confirm that when analysing qualitative data, a network format can useful to illustrate ‘interconnected complexity’ where there exists a semantic relationship. I have used a network format to illustrate the process of analysis and findings therefrom.

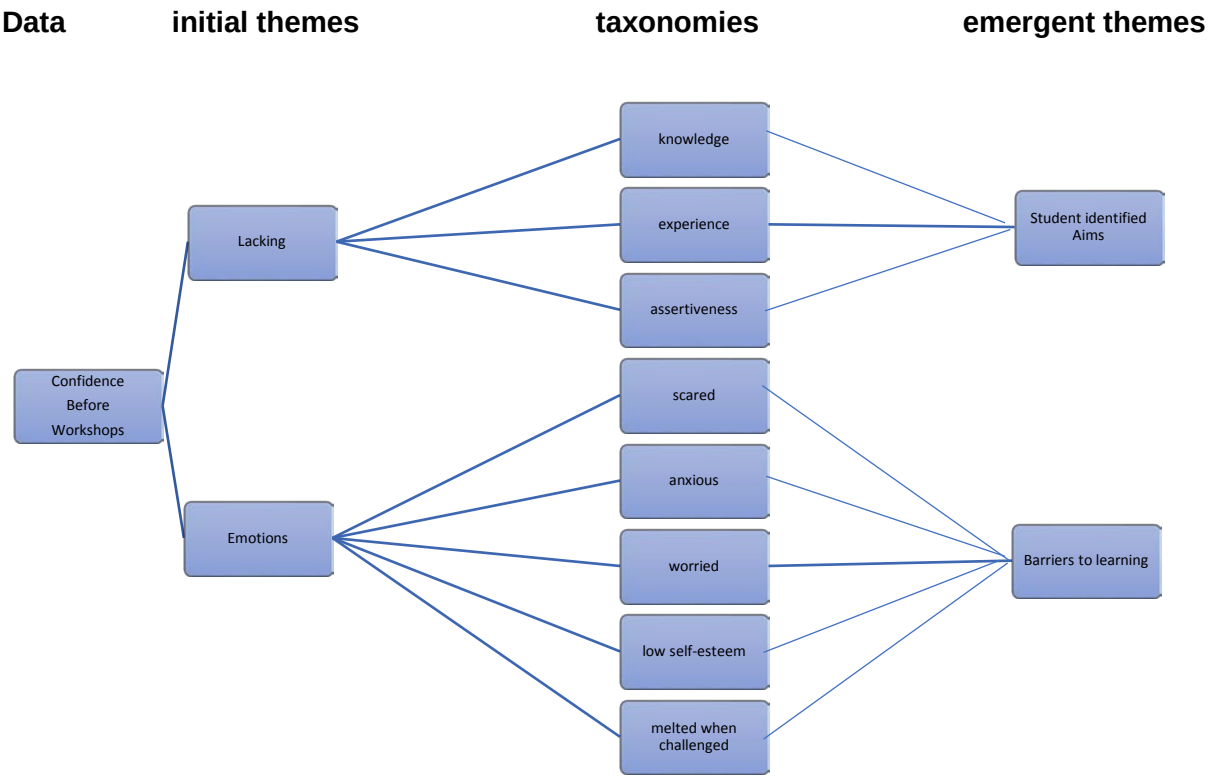

Chart 1. Analysis of interviews and questionnaires responses in respect of confidence prior to the workshops

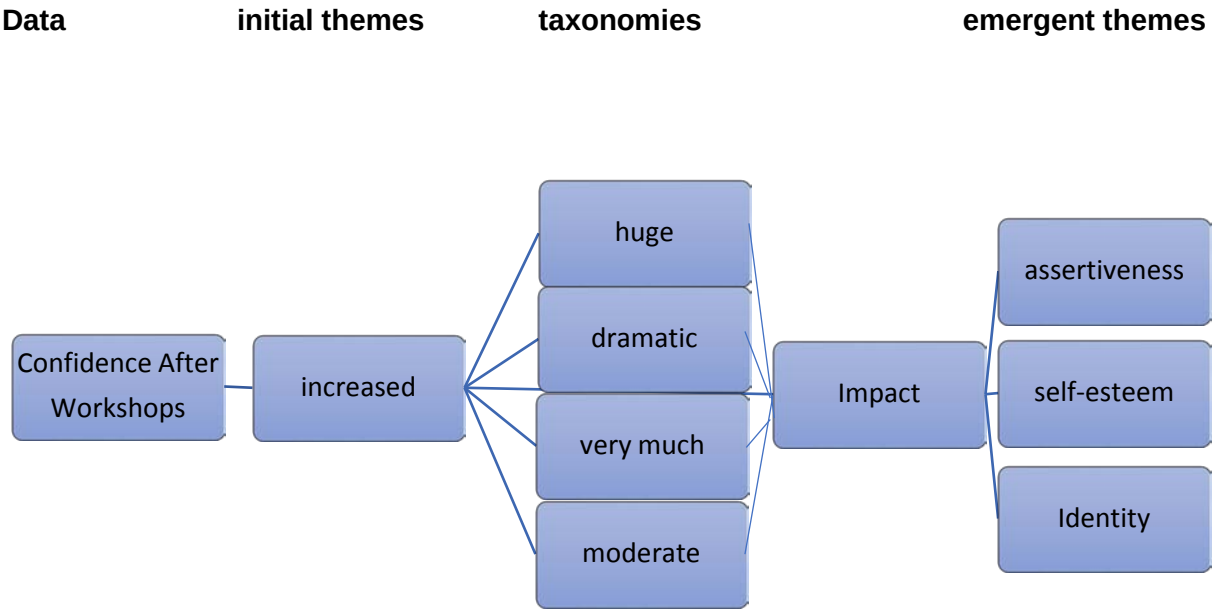

Chart 2. Analysis of interviews and questionnaires responses in respect of confidence after the workshops

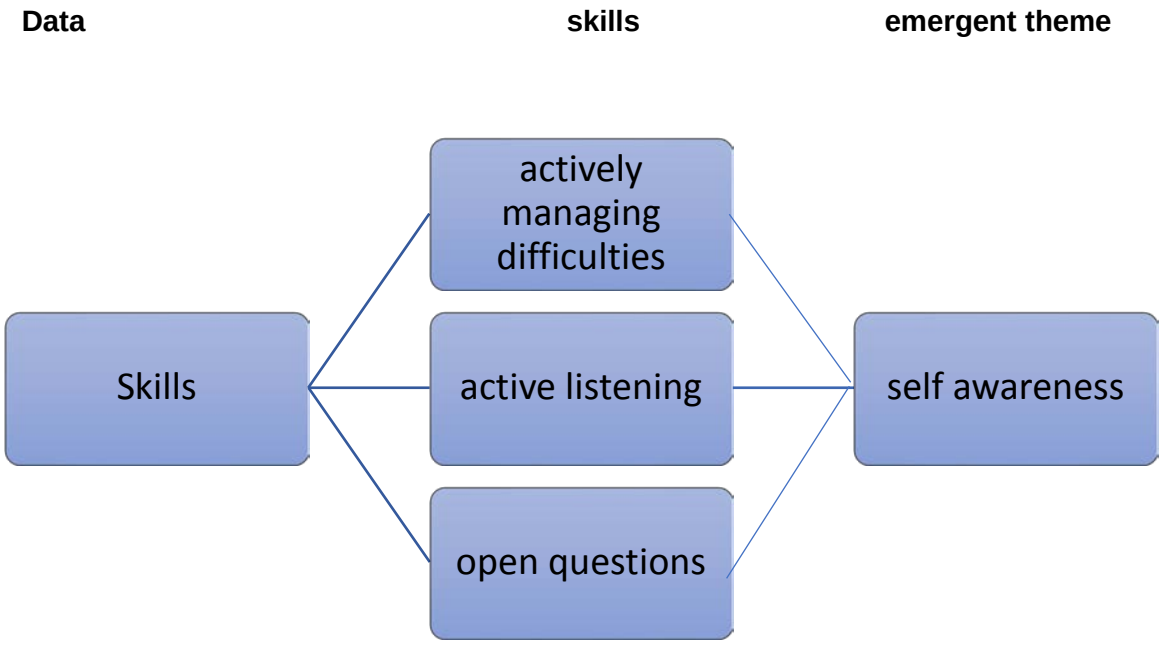

Chart 3. Analysis of interviews and questionnaires responses in respect of skills identified by participants

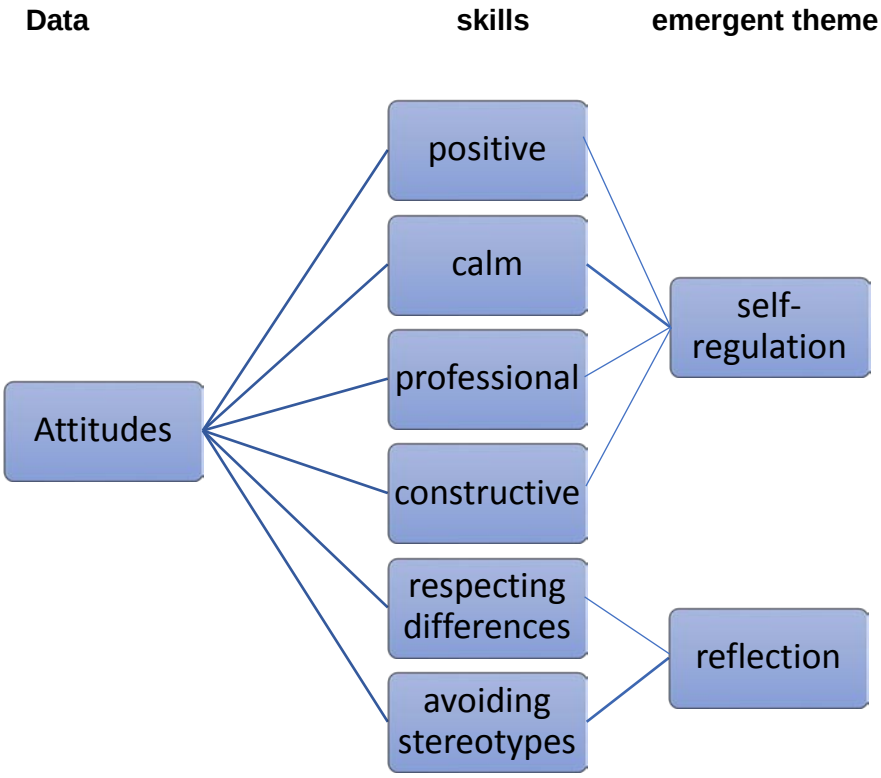

Chart 4. Analysis of interviews and questionnaires responses in respect of attitudes identified by participants

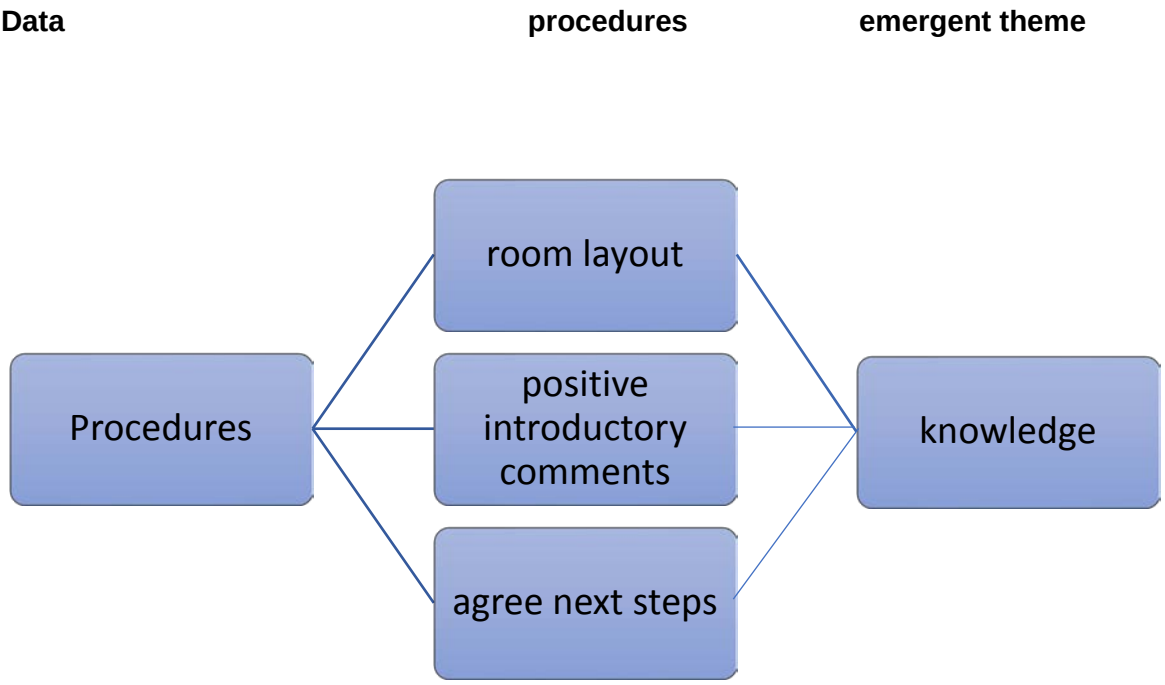

Chart 5. Analysis of interviews and questionnaires responses in respect of procedures identified by participants

Findings

The findings revealed that before the workshops all participants expressed a lack of confidence to some degree. Only one participant said she had some confidence due to experience of working with parents but she 'wanted to learn more about how to approach parents about negative feedback'. After the workshops participants all reported increased levels of confidence from 'moderate' to 'huge'. The identification of specific skills was associated with increased levels of confidence. In her response, a participant identified specific skills which had increased confidence; '[the] professional boundaries one because you know where you stand and you know how far you can go and the open questions one

because I've learned how to ask questions without making assumptions and without stereotyping'. Most significantly, there was evidence to suggest that the workshops had impacted upon how the participants saw themselves. For example, one participant reported 'I see myself as more of a practitioner now, as daft as that sounds because I'm not in a setting'.

The use of roleplay was seen as an effective vehicle for developing confidence by most participants. One explained, 'I do struggle with role play, which is down to my confidence, but as time went on within these workshops I increasingly became more confident'.

The end of module evaluations evidenced that students were engaged, that they recognised the module's application to practice and that role play was an effective approach to learning. This last point was in marked contrast to the previous year's evaluation. In summary, the findings suggest that students chose the module to increase their knowledge, experience and levels of assertiveness. Negative affective dispositions were identified as potential barriers to learning. Findings indicated positive outcomes from the module in terms of assertiveness, self-esteem, enhanced identity, self-awareness, self-regulation, reflection and knowledge of procedures.

Discussion

The absence of any negative evaluations of the workshops may reflect the power imbalance inherent in the researcher/participant and lecturer/student relationship. Cohen et al. (2007, p.151) acknowledge power imbalances as potentially leading to 'acquiescence' on the part of interviewees, i.e. responses designed to please the researcher. The use of anonymous questionnaires and end of module evaluations may have ameliorated participants' inclination to give pleasing responses. There was strong congruity between all data sources which suggests that acquiescence did not undermine the validity of responses.

It could be argued that the findings' validity is undermined by the subjectivity of the question. In other words, students reported increased confidence may not translate into an improvement in communication skills. However, the research sought to explore students' *perceptions* of self-efficacy (Bandura,1994) rather than their attainment. The affective was established in the literature review as a potential barrier to learning, (Beard et al. 2007; Gibson-Beverley and Shwartz, 2008) and the findings support the conclusion that the intervention helped mitigate some of the factors limiting students' participation.

The module evaluations were focused upon the whole module experience rather than the workshops intervention. However, the module was evaluated more positively in comparison with previous years' evaluations and so can be regarded as corroborating the findings from other data.

Conclusion

The difficulty that experience and skills are not 'easily garnered' from degree studies (QAA, 2103, p.39) presents a challenge as to how we can provide students with meaningful experiences within the confines of a formal learning environment. Teaching strategies which acknowledge the need for experiential learning and the imperative to support the development of skills, dispositions and attitudes as well as knowledge potentially facilitate students' increased self-worth and confidence. This highlights the need to acknowledge the impact of the affective on learning. Fuller's (2016, p.12), assertion that despite ostensibly having equality of opportunity, women in H.E. often strive to achieve 'parity in the selves they strive to be' was borne out by the findings of the research. Therefore, it is important to employ teaching strategies which identify and address the affective as well as structural and socio-cultural barriers which may limit learning opportunities for specific groups such as young women. The fact that young women are disproportionately represented in courses such as early childhood studies presents an opportunity for those leading teaching to employ innovative strategies to promote positive change and support the empowerment of young women.

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Appendix 1: Overview of Workshops comprising the intervention

Session	Perceived needs identified by students	Skills and dispositions focus	Workshop theory and activities
1	Confidence and experience	Self- audit of skills and confidence & establishing boundaries	• Communities of practice (Wenger 1998) • Sharing reflections on self-audit and identifying group and individual learning needs
2	Identification of skills and attributes for effective communication	Identifying and evaluating specific communication skills	• Revisit self-audit: Johari's window (Edmond & Price 2012 adapted from Luft & Ingham 1955) • Analysing /clarifying thinking on ground rules to establish consensus on ground rules • Evaluating skills and attributes required (diamond ranking exercise) • Identifying 3-point action plan
3	Managing differing perspectives	Exploring values and beliefs • Identifying areas of consensus • Using open questions	• Exploring values and beliefs Bloom, P. and Ellis, L. (2009) • Open/closed questions quiz • Role play on conflicting perspectives (EAL child) • Revisit role play using open questions and identifying areas of consensus
4	Addressing difficult situations with parents	Managing interactions • Recognising imbalances of power • Empathy	• From unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence model (Roberts 2009) • Role play on addressing difficulties with parents (biting child)
5	Confidence	Assertiveness • Active listening (Acknowledging & reflecting back)	• Group debate on smacking • Assertiveness, Active listening (Hughes and Read; 2012 Price and Ota; 2016)
6	Harder to reach	Empathy	• Analysing issues for parents in case studies

	parents	• Applying empathy	(fathers, teenage parents, SEND, offenders)
7	Addressing difficult situations with parents	<u>Professional boundaries</u> • Establishing and maintaining boundaries	• MacNaughton and Hughes (2011) – unfair thinking model • Applying own strategy to professional boundaries • Analysing case study on 'othering' and 'privileging' & rehearsing skills in role play
8	Addressing difficult situations with parents	<u>Rehearsal of skills</u> • Reviewing self-audit	• Reviewing skills and dispositions & themes identified within module • Final role play: dealing with difficulty (parents in denial) • Analysis, reflection and feedback