

Leading by Example: An Examination of Early Education Foundation Degree Students Completing Research Dissertations

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ABSTRACT: The research was carried out in collaboration with student-practitioners following a part-time Foundation Degree (FdA) in Early Childhood Education and Care, (ECEC). It concentrates on the final phase of the degree programme which requires the presentation of a practice based inquiry (Dissertation) carried out within a workplace setting. The pedagogy underpinning the process is explained in terms of key teaching and learning strategies. A qualitative approach was adopted using content analysis, relational analysis and interviews with students to gather information. This revealed how the practice based focus of the dissertations encompassed both structural and process features of quality improvement. It exposed the value of collaborative engagement and how the process of practice based inquiry influenced and shaped personal and professional refinements to practice. Discussion considers how engaging in practice based inquiry incorporated a number of features associated with leading and developing early childhood practice.

Keywords: quality improvement, collaborative inquiry, practice based inquiry, relational analysis.

Introduction

In England the introduction of an Early Childhood Education and Care, (ECEC) Foundation Degree (FdA) has encouraged entry into Higher Education from practitioners who have significant practice based experience. They are encouraged to enhance their theoretical knowledge of early education and engage in learning which links theory with practice. It was within this context that the research took place and involved a period of collaborative engagement with a cohort of University students who were also experienced ECEC practitioners. They were in the last phase of a Foundation Degree which culminates in each student completing a practice based research dissertation. This is best defined as a process which has a strong ethical base and involves systematic practice based inquiry directed towards creating and extending professional knowledge and professional practice.

The rationale is based upon a recognition that practitioner led practice based inquiry is considered to be an important facet of ECEC quality improvement and complements more structural forms of policy and planning at national level. For example ECEC quality in some countries is determined by externally measured evaluations which encompass national boundaries and in others determined by locally conducted inquiry as the basis for evaluating practice. (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2001). In addition, the determinants of quality are reliant upon the way quality ECEC practice is researched and measured (Fenech, 2011; Mathers et al, 2012). An issue that Goodfellow, (2007) explores and asks that educational institutions consider ways to explore the possibilities and advantages of practitioner research with students. She suggests that a student practitioner has a role to play as they are both an inside practitioner and an outside researcher and recognises a movement towards what can be described as a postmodern perspective on practice based inquiry that readily lends itself to the work of early years practitioners. A perspective which influenced the design of the degree programme which formed the basis of this research. It is an approach which asks early childhood practitioners to recognise diverse understandings about children and families and the changing social context within which they live and work and from this perspective, to carefully consider the nature and purpose of practice. In this way practitioner based research can be seen as extending professional knowledge and having an impact on practice. An approach which sees those who are researched as an integral part of the process and has significant value in the way it can articulate the voices of those most closely involved. It therefore subscribes to the idea that collaborative investigation means actively engaging with participants rather than developing research on participants (Reason & Riley, 2008). The approach sees the researcher as carefully considering not only the purpose and value of their research but what form the research may take, and its potential impact on those most closely involved including children and families. As a consequence it is not unusual to find that methods of inquiry are designed to involve and recognise the views of others. For

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example, interviews, participant observations, the use of reflective journals, phenomenological investigation and collaborative inquiry. An approach which places a responsibility on tutors to carefully consider the way they introduce the underlying pedagogy and methodological approaches and consider the importance of developing a questioning culture. It is argued that this form of approach promotes an active engagement with research in practice that moves away from a natural science model based on a positivist tradition towards adopting a rigorous, ethical research approach in close proximity with those involved and developing reflexive analysis (Oliveira & Formosinho, 2012; Pascal & Bertram, 2012)

Within the degree programme used as the basis for this research the approach begins with the student drawing information from practice which leads to a consideration of the theoretical perspectives which underpin that practice. From this it becomes possible to reflect upon and refine applicability for practice. An interaction between students and tutors which according to (Knowles, 1990) is best described as tutors encouraging student involvement in the learning process by encouraging them to engage in a dialogue about their own learning. This underpins their self-motivation and application to practice, which in turn provides momentum and purpose to learning. In terms of teaching and learning this involves the sharing of knowledge via lectures, workshops, self-directed study, online learning activities, tutorials and seminars. It also involves a level of careful explanation about course content and its relevance to practice as well as a degree of negotiation between students and tutors about what is taught and learnt. An approach which allows students to find common areas of interest as well as identify and share areas of professional expertise. It requires tutors to carefully monitor what is taught and where appropriate consider the introduction of theoretical perspectives and the relevance of such theory to practice, (Jarvis, 2002). It is a process which moves away from a traditional teaching style with an emphasis upon the transmission of information and involves a more interactive, form of learning. An interactivity which means students are not solely *acquiring* knowledge but also *constructing* knowledge, because it engages the learner in different levels of practice based reflection (Cowan, 2007). It therefore empowers the student to develop a reflective stance and develop the capacity to make rational decisions about practice and consider any potential impact on practice (Appleby, 2010).

The process, can be further explained in Figure 1. This identifies key reflective questions which students are asked to consider as they plan the research design of their dissertations.



FIGURE 1 Developing Learning and Confidence in Practice

Ethical behaviour permeates the process from the outset. Each student must meet University ethics standards and as the design of the inquiry is developed complete a written ethics protocol which is presented for tutor approval. The key questions promote a consideration of professional roles and professional responsibilities as well as the need to consider how personal experience, knowledge and learning may be enhanced. They represent a sequence of events and underline the need to systematically engage in inquiry. They also act as a prompt for discussion and reflection as the process moves forward. For example, to consider engaging in practice based research in a manner that is respectful to colleagues, parents and children. To carefully consider the focus of the research and its value to the ECEC setting and engage in sharing of knowledge. Moreover, to carefully consider the impact of the inquiry upon organisational culture. A process does not move, which requires careful consideration of the learning and teaching approaches, which supports the process.

Research questions

This research aims to consider

- how the practice based focus of the dissertations encompassed both structural and process features of quality improvement.
- the process of collaborative engagement from students undertaking their practice based inquiries and how this process shapes personal and professional refinements to practice.
- how the process reveals features associated with leading and developing early childhood practice.

Method

Research participants

The research was undertaken by University tutors in collaboration with 23 students. All the students were registered for a part-time University Foundation Degree taught in the community at a local Children's Centre. The students worked in settings representing childminding, (Family Day Care) independent day nurseries, community based pre-schools, voluntary sector settings, foster care, maintained schools and a Children's Centre. Urban and rural settings were represented and the settings supported children and families from a wide ranging social spectrum. All the participants brought with them considerable workplace experience ranging from four to eighteen years.

Research ethics

The ethical parameters of the research was submitted to a University Ethics Committee and agreed as an appropriate approach within the research design. The Committee identified the need to alleviate any potential ethical issues associated with tutors collaborating with students. This resulted in an agreed ethical protocol between the researchers and the students about participation and an agreed process for any student to withdraw from the study (Walker & Reed, 2012). In addition, ensuring that the research process did not impinge upon the academic work of the students. Therefore, the final analysis of dissertation content was conducted after students had submitted their completed dissertations and these had been marked and moderated by a team of

tutors and External Examiners. Likewise interviews were completed after submission and respondents were able to consider the whole research process.

The research: design and methods

The research took place over a twelve month period. The students were aware of the research process and actively participated in formulating an ethical protocol. They were not involved in the interpretation of data but did receive respondent feedback at the end of the inquiry and were able to comment on the results. A draft copy of this paper was seen by student representatives. Data arose from content analysis of the final dissertations, and an analysis of personal interviews. The collective data was then scrutinised by combining and hybridising the data: a process which can be described as Relational Analysis, (Robinson, 2011). He suggests this approach can supplement qualitative analysis and attempts to bring themes, codes, or categories together into a coherent combination by exploring key relational forms: for example, descriptive relationships, as well as causal relationships and conceptual relationships. The data was assimilated into a representational grid to allow interpretation of the evidence. This was useful to ensure there was scrutiny within methods and between methods of inquiry (Denzin, 2006). A representative (Senior Officer) from the Local Authority (the regional local administrative area within which the practitioners were employed) acted as a critical companion throughout the process in order to verify the issues raised and claims made within the dissertations.

Research findings

Each of the student dissertations was completed by the required submission date. Each student had developed a clear focus, theme and title for the chosen inquiry. All but one of the dissertations actively involved other colleagues in the setting. The exception was a dissertation which used methods to gather data which involved a survey of other early childhood settings in the local area and did this by engaging with colleagues those ECEC settings. In all but one of the studies the methodological approaches can be described as 'action research' (McNiff, 2010) using qualitative methods of inquiry. One of the students used a positivist approach and presented a numeric analysis of findings. All the dissertations contained detailed accounts of the way the inquiry was shaped and acted upon in practice. An informed literature base was present in each of the dissertations as

was evidence of the way the students had adopted a particular ethical approach fit for purpose within their own settings. Data was gathered in a variety of ways including photographic evidence, interviews, observations, reflective diaries, surveys and video analysis. All of the students reported findings based on their inquiries to others in the setting and where appropriate this included parents. Each student, reflected upon the research undertaken and considered its impact on themselves and the setting. When the dissertations were completed and had passed through the University assessment process, three of the students were granted financial support from the University to present their dissertation findings to an international academic conference.

Purpose and focus

An analysis of the dissertations suggested a distinction between aims and purpose. The aims were seen as the functionality of the research which was concerned with methods of inquiry, obtaining results and meeting timescales. The purpose was seen much more in terms of improving quality and supporting day to day practice. Words such as *value, enhance, support, help, share, collaborate and improve* were used as descriptors. Previous professional experience and personal interest was used to contextualise the focus of the inquiries, for example, an interest in a particular age phase or an aspect of policy or policy review. The importance of collaboration with others when establishing the purpose of the inquiry emerged. For example, key phrases such as *'maintaining trust' and 'doing things of value to the setting'*. Content and relational analysis revealed that the purpose and aims in all but one of the studies was associated with structural organisational features as described by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, (OECD, 2012, p. 11) which was based upon the work of Litjens & Taguma, (2010). The structural features are often seen as aspects of ECEC practice which can be regulated and may be concerned with statutory requirements. For example, the students used terms such as: *'to meet the targets exposed by last inspection, 'to review what we do before inspection' 'to review the policy on children's transitions' "to consider the regulations and policy regarding safeguarding."* The process features encompassed the relationships and interactions between the practitioner, children and the wider community and were considered to have a direct influence on children's well-being and development. For example, students used words and phrases such as *'improve what we do day-to-day' 'examine my own practice' 'have a closer look at what we do' 'give myself and others useful information to make improvements,' 'better communication with parents' and 'reflect on what we do'.* The analysis also revealed comparative relationships (an interconnectedness) identified between the structural and process features. This became apparent during interviews with participants who indicated how their dissertation theme may have been focused upon a regulatory requirement, but also

involved an examination of day-to-day practice. An aspect which was seen within the data in terms of semiotic relationships (an analysis of symbols and grids and diagrams used in the dissertations to illustrate a concept or feature). Regulatory requirements were often seen as a clear and important focus for investigation. In the main related to the curriculum or specific requirements regarding safeguarding and assessment. They were also seen in relation to the process of engaging in the inquiry, in particular to understand the views of others in the setting about day-to-day practice.

Personal learning

Nearly two thirds of the students introduced the first section of their dissertations saying how they 'were required' to engage in an inquiry as part of their degree programme. However, the same or similar words and phrases (or emphasis upon requirement) were not used when at the end of their written studies as they reflected and looked back on their research. They described how they had enjoyed and learnt from the process. *"The parents participated as if they were as keen to learn as the children."* *"This inquiry was quite difficult and I can see clearly now ... It was if a light was switched on. "* *"What I did was not a one off thing, it will always come back and erupt – and as practitioners we need to be aware of this."* Such views provided evidence of changing perspectives and the student seeing the inquiry as a process not an event. It also indicated an increase in confidence and the ability to reflect critically on the process. When considered in terms of dialectical relations (content and concepts in the studies which appeared opposite but dependent upon each other) the word 'confident' also appeared and was used in the context of personal confidence and the ability to adapt and change things or challenge existing practice. It was also used to illustrate confidence about the findings of a practice based inquiry. In particular when describing how the dissertation findings were shared with others. Terms were used, such as *"The research has given us a secure foundation to refine our policies and actions with parents"*. *"I felt confident in what I had done and found"*

Leading, developing and refining practice

The dissertations contained evidence (towards the end of the dissertations when students reviewed their personal perspectives about the research process) of the way they had altered a personal view or position. In some cases this was the result of reviewing available literature, a consideration of findings or taking on board the views of others. This was interesting as it indicated how the process had altered thinking and

promoted reflection and was illustrated by terms such as: *“improve, drive, alter and involve, share, collaborate and reflect.”* Indeed, collaborative refinement to policy and practice was apparent in all of the dissertations and there was a recognition that any refinements to practice had to emerge from within an existing organisational framework. It indicated a realization that however strong the case for refinement of practice any action must underpin the collective values seen or heard within the organisation. An issue which was taken up in interviews where students confirmed that their research findings and the process of engaging in an inquiry had acted as a catalyst for change. These it seemed, gave the practitioner the confidence to begin a process of shaping and refining practice and was a *“springboard for action”* and *“a useful starting point.”* It was also seen when meetings to discuss the implications of the research and were described, for example: *“we got together”, “It was decided collectively” “we met and agreed”, “we met and considered”* as well as *“we believe”* and *“this sits well with what goes on in the setting.”* In effect revealing the importance of someone who is an integrated part of the organisation, and has an opportunity to contribute to leading practice. Not from the position of a designated leader, but by gradually influencing and shaping practice in the company of others as espoused by Clark and Baylis, (2010). An important point that requires further attention. In particular to consider which strategies promoted the shaping and refining of practice.

Discussion: the qualities required to shape practice

Often, the purpose of an inquiry reveals the tone of a workplace culture. If quality improvement is defined as meeting targets or having in place particular policies or adhering to regulatory standards it sends a strong message to practitioners to consider mechanisms for change that support this perception of quality. The data indicated how the process of practice based inquiry encouraged different perspectives and perceptions of improving quality that were both influenced by structural features and process features. When these were interconnected and located within an issue of relevance to the ECEC setting the inquiry became visible and relevant. This is because national policy and a regulatory approach to quality had to be translated into real world collaborative inquiry as a means to elicit views on what is happening and what works on the ground (Callan, 2010; Reed, 2011). A considerable responsibility and one that the authors contend should not be taken lightly by tutors or students. It therefore follows that to make this happen in practice requires not only establishing a pedagogic base and following a set of research processes and procedures. It requires professional qualities which allow purposeful engagement with others, the ability to identify areas of practice

and is meaningful to those involved. This requires substantial personal and professional characteristics, as well as knowledge and understanding (Messenger, 2010; Potter & Quill, 2006). For example, knowledge and understanding about the way organisational culture as defined by Schein (1984, p4) is understood. This he saw as the strategies found within an organisation which makes up the way that organisation operates. They are unwritten and usually reflect the way people think or feel and illustrate the values seen or heard within the organisation. In effect demonstrating a key quality of shaping practice which is the ability to understand and engage with an organisational culture so that those involved can see how the process has “worked well enough to be considered valid” (Schein: P4). Moreover, to understand the complexities of being a researcher who may be seen by the in an ECEC setting as an insider but bringing with them outside influences and practices. This requires the ability to engage in sometimes delicate negotiation about the focus of an inquiry and be aware of the nuances of day-to-day working. It also requires the ability to interrogate and understand competing values, cultural backgrounds and educational philosophies. It means developing the ability to stand back and see things more clearly and consider how to give voice to those within the setting (Goodfellow, 2010; Gregory & Mahera, 2011).

These are quite complex interconnected professional actions and can be interpreted as representing particular facets of leadership. This can be illustrated by examining a recent report from the London Early Years Forum (O’Sullivan & Chambers, 2013). The report focused on provision for two year olds and the importance of developing consistently high quality early education. Central to its findings was the importance of relevant training and support for leaders, and developing their ability to confidently explain the pedagogical rationale for their actions. It stresses the importance of practitioner research within the context of pedagogic leadership which should be seen as not just trying out something new but instead deeply questioning how what and why things are done. (p.20). It argues there is value in systemically gathering evidence to gain a greater knowledge of the services on offer. This provides the knowledge, understanding and confidence to make constructive changes for the better. It underlines what Fullan, (2001) argues is about motivating and convincing practitioners to do things differently, producing evidence that the change is worthwhile and beneficial to children and their learning. A point taken up by Hallet (2013), she argues this involves leadership in practice which promotes a learning culture within the organisation in which learning, knowledge and pedagogy are highly visible. A feature identified as an essential component of leadership in a study from Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, (2007) examining Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector (ELEYS). The study identified particular professional characteristics that were important in relation to the role of a leader. This included an understanding the organisational context within which any

impact of change would take place, a commitment to collaboration and a purposeful desire to improve quality. A paper by Raelin (2011), builds on this view and contends that the role of the researcher is not only to engage in research but to encourage the observed to be part of the research dialogue. In effect doing what a report from the Excellence in Practice Based Research in Public Health (Potter and Quill 2006, p.17) sees as a key leadership role; which is to develop and encourage interactive forums across disciplines and institutions. It is therefore possible to contend the students were exhibiting what LaRocco & Bruns (2013) see as features which typify authentic leadership in exercising influence to reach shared goals by engaging in continuous learning. When they do this, they are then building and forging relationships, and modelling behaviour they expect others to display. It is therefore possible to speculate that the students were formalising an approach to leadership as suggested by Aubrey, et al, (2013) because the research process provided a framework for collaboration and finding ways to arrive at a consensus about aspects of improving practice and policy. Thus leadership skills were developed by *acquiring* knowledge but also *constructing* knowledge and developing ways to effectively disseminate the results.

Conclusion

Analysis of the dissertations illustrated the way students had acted in a professional and ethical way when engaged in practice based inquiry. The practice based focus of the dissertations encompassed both structural and process features of quality improvement. The research made visible the value of collaborative engagement to improve practice and the importance of sharing knowledge at local level. The process had a personal impact on those involved and heightened professional confidence as well as allowing an acquisition of knowledge. The process of engaging in practice based inquiry incorporated a number of features associated with leading and developing early childhood practice.

Implications for future research

The pedagogy which underpinned the dissertation phase of the degree programme provided a useful framework for students to engage in practice based inquiry. How to improve that framework will become a focus for future research. Students felt they had made a contribution to refining practice and it will be useful to consider what small strategies promoted the shaping and refining of practice. In particular the importance of disseminating the results of an inquiry to those most closely involved.

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