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Supporting Student Transition into Professional Practice

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ABSTRACT

Transitions can affect students throughout their time at university. This study aims to show the potential of an additional, non-assessed placement in supporting MA3 Initial Teacher Education (ITE) students with skills thought to benefit transitions. Much of the research around student transitions focuses upon transitions into and out of higher education. In addition, within the MA ITE programme, students perceive challenges in transitioning into Professional Practice during their four year programme. A pilot study was undertaken to support third year MA ITE students in developing skills and attributes associated with the enhancement theme of student transitions in higher education: self-efficacy; reflection; and connectedness. The study involved MA3 students visiting an Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) setting in one local authority, one afternoon a week for eight weeks, the aim of the placement being for them to gain experience in playing and communicating with younger children, prior to their official early years placement. Initial findings from student focus group discussions suggest that students perceived that the study did help to support them in further developing transition skills and attributes.

Keywords: student transitions; self-efficacy; critical reflection; connectedness.

Introduction

This 'On the Horizon' paper explores the question, "Does an additional, non-assessed based placement support students in developing transition skills and attributes at the third year of study on the MA ITE programme?" This study was created in response to the Higher Education Enhancement theme of Student Transitions, and the evidence from literature that suggests the student experience can be enriched through effective transitions (Cheng, 2015). Anecdotal evidence from students and tutors suggest that the third year Professional Placement is a critical period for students because of increasing requirements and expectations, including a different focus in school (early years) and a more demanding professional context, emphasising layered, "multi-contextual transitions" (Jindal-Snape, 2015, p. 1) through university. This paper argues that the additional placement offers students the opportunity to develop skills in self-efficacy, confidence and critical reflection.

Literature review

In order to promote successful student transition through higher education, several key skills are deemed essential. The skills identified by Cheng (2015), are those of: self-efficacy; critical self-reflection; and connectedness. Developing these key skills became the main objectives of the project.

Bandura (1977) defines self-efficacy as a person's self-belief in their ability to perform a given task. Other research defines self-efficacy as a key element in the transition process (Zepke & Leach, 2010; Cheng, 2015) as students with strong self-efficacy will make "vigorous and persistent efforts" (Palmer, 2006, p. 337) and are perhaps more likely to succeed, even in the face of short-term failure (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 170). Self-efficacy is therefore integral in coping with the transition from the student to professional persona. An influential way to improve self-efficacy is to enable students to experience "enactive mastery experiences" (Bandura, 1997, cited in Palmer, 2006, p. 337); an authentic experience through which the student can succeed. Engagement in this project offered the opportunity for student autonomy in core aspects of learning, with potential to influence intrinsic motivation (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 170). Lizzio (2006, p. 2) suggests that a student's sense of capability depends upon how well they understand what is expected of them.

The second objective was to develop the students' critical self-reflection skills. Reflection is at the heart of good teaching and it is a skill or "way of working" which will help to bridge the transition between the student persona and that of the working professional (Jindal-Snape & Holmes, 2009, p. 219). ITE students are encouraged to reflect upon their practice, mostly in a written format which, from observations, some students find challenging. According to Korthagen and Wubbels (1995, cited in Stokking, Leenders, De Jong & Van Tartwijk, 2003, p. 334), reflection involves the mental process of "structuring and restructuring experiences, problems and/or knowledge" but part of this process requires taking the time to think, analyse, discuss and question the experiences (Zeichner, 1982, cited in Stokking et al., 2003, p. 334). Opportunities to share thinking with each other enable students to understand that they are already reflecting upon their practice, through conversations which help them to restructure their thinking and question their practice. Indeed, Jindal-Snape and Holmes (2009, p. 230) posit whether reflection can be taught, or instead be the responsibility of

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the tutor to “create opportunities and environment to reflect”. This project provides an opportunity for students to reflect critically upon their practice.

As a final objective, developing a sense of “connectedness”, is stressed as a key element of student success (Lizzio, 2006, p. 3). Thomas (2012, p. 6) summarises that a sense of belonging is “at the heart of successful retention”. This sense of belonging is achieved through the relationships a student makes, both academic and social, and the sense of “connectedness” (Lizzio, 2006, p. 3) that they develop. Zepke and Leach (2010, p. 171) concur that peer relationships are integral to a student’s successful academic learning, and Moran and Gonyea (2003, cited in Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 171) state that peer interaction is the strongest predictor of successful engagement and outcomes within higher education.

Project process

The participant group consisted of seven volunteer students from MA3 (ITE) who responded to the initial call for participants via e-mail to the year group. As there were eight places available in placements, all interested students were able to participate without any further selection process.

In order to answer the question, “Does an additional, non-assessed based placement support students in developing transition skills at the third year of study on the MA ITE programme?”, the students entered into the process as co-participants, incorporating an element of emergent design (O’Leary, 2010, p. 68). Ethical approval was confirmed by the university. In order to elicit student perception an interpretive approach was deemed to be most appropriate, with a focus upon qualitative methodologies, emphasising the role of language (Robson, 2002, p. 25). The students elected to work together as a focus group and chose to provide data through this means. Currently, two focus groups have taken place, pre and post placement, in order to share perceptions of how the experience may support them in transitioning into their official placement later in third year. On both occasions a semi-structured interview was facilitated by one of the authors. The discussion was based upon questions pertaining to the key transition skills of self-efficacy, reflection, and connectedness. Permission was granted from the group to record the discussion. Group dynamics may have influenced responses, however, the students, as co-researchers, expressed their preference for this method. Notes were recorded by the remaining two authors with a focus on the spoken word. The focus group recordings were analysed by all three authors. “A classic set of analytic moves” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, cited in Robson, 2002, p. 450) was used for analysis, consisting of: identifying themes and relationships through reflection on the language used, and reaching a small set of generalisations. Course commitments have meant that students have yet to be given the opportunity to analyse the data should they wish to, as this would ensure that tutor bias has not occurred.

Findings and conclusions

The focus group discussions were carried out pre-placement and post placement. The students were asked to discuss their thoughts and feelings about Professional Placement in relation to the themes identified within the aims: self-efficacy; critical self-reflection; and connectedness.

Pre-placement

Throughout the project, students were motivated to engage in discussion. Most students agreed one of their main reasons for participating was the opportunity to gain more professional experience. Student C commented: “I feel disconnected from school, since we are not in school very much”. Other students suggested that they valued the chance to work in an early years environment, since they felt they lacked experience. The students anticipated that this placement would give them the chance to build their confidence. Student D explained that the opportunity would “focus on developing my confidence as a teacher”. When discussing their ability to critically reflect, there was general agreement that this was an area in which they lacked confidence. Student C commented that “we haven’t received enough inputs on reflective writing yet and it’s quite a big part of our assessment”. In relation to peer support, the majority agreed with student E, who stated that this was beneficial because “people on the course really understand what you are experiencing”.

Post placement

There was an overwhelming agreement that all students had gained confidence from the experience. Student A commented: “it has helped me to understand Professional Placement is not such a big thing as I was making it out to be in my head, I had it all within me, I could do it”. Student F remarked: “I feel much better. When I walk into the nursery now, I feel more confident in what I am doing and what needs doing”. A few students were in agreement that they felt more confident about moving into the professional practice section of the course. Student G commented that “this has helped me recognise gaps in my knowledge and I have been working to address these, before placement, by reading”. Student C reflected: “I have more understanding of the early years and their (the children) age and stage”. There was unanimous agreement that having no summative assessment allowed for a more meaningful experience. Student D commented: “Knowing this was not assessed, we were free to focus on the experience and enjoy being with the children”.

With regards to critical reflection, the students were generally more confident in discussing their reflections than writing them. Student G commented that “having a discussion with people is a nice way to reflect and it feels more natural”. A number of students

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agreed that they were not confident when writing reflections. Furthermore, there was an emphasis on how the group had naturally developed a sense of connectedness. Students discussed how they were able to share achievements and experiences with each other. Student F commented that “it was so nice that there was a camaraderie between us”. Student E observed: “it was good being able to talk with people not necessarily in your friendship groups but who shared this experience”. Additionally, the students discussed the positive experiences they had had with the professionals in practice, and student E further observed that “the professionals in the nursery (ELC setting) were so helpful and would teach me by involving me in things that were happening”. Student D felt that she had developed useful professional relationships that she could call upon, if she needed advice in the future. Student C noted that “professional bonds” were formed with staff in practice. Student G articulated that they were treated “as professionals and not as students” by staff in the ELC setting.

Conclusions

Early analysis suggests that the placement has had a positive effect on student confidence and self-belief, thus developing self-efficacy. There is also evidence to suggest that students have been enabled to develop autonomous learning through peer support, which has led to increased confidence with skills of reflection. There is an indication that students have felt more connected with peers and professionals, focussing on relationships rather than assessment. Further data will be collected following the students’ official placement in order to gather student perceptions on the impact of the study.

In addition, there are potential pedagogical implications. To gain more experience, re-ignite a connectedness with school, and to develop student resilience, the current pattern of placements could be reassessed. This may also be an implication on other courses with Professional Placements.

Students’ preference for oral, rather than written reflections, may be a key point which could lead to further inquiry of the types of assessment that are used within professional practice and throughout any programme. Greater emphasis on oral reflections may enable students to adopt a creative approach rather than spending considerable time writing up the reflections. One such method could be to develop the use of the focus group model, where supported, oral reflection could enable students to develop reflective skills (working with the key idea from the data that the group connectedness was perceived positively). Such groups could be facilitated, creating a “Community of Practice” (Wenger, 2000). This may have pedagogical implications for every course that encourages students to critically reflect.

The importance of building relationships was noted as a recurring theme from student data. Developing positive, professional relationships is crucial in meeting the Standards for Registration (General Teaching Council Scotland [GTCS], 2012, Standards: 1, 3.1.2 & 3.2.2). This is a vital element of a student teacher’s development and yet it appears that there may be a juxtaposition in professional practice requirements, with a detrimental, perceived or otherwise, emphasis on the written word and written assessment.

In conclusion, this study has been useful in terms of allowing us, as tutors, to recognise that an additional, non-assessed based placement can develop some of the key skills and attributes for students’ successful transition from university into Professional Placement.

Biographies

Donna Dey is a Lecturer in the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Dundee. She teaches on the MA Education, PGDE and M.Ed programmes and has a particular interest in the Health and Wellbeing and student transitions.

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