

What Undergraduate Early Childhood Education and Care Students Find ‘Troublesome’ During the Early Period of Practice Placements

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Abstract

Social professional students, such as those training to become Early Childhood Education and Care Practitioners, Social Workers or Social Pedagogues, transform their understanding of the social professional role during practice placements. Students observe practitioners at work, eventually learning how to direct their own activities with service users. Yet the challenging part of this learning journey, which students are required to traverse to perform social professional functions, frequently gets minimised in tales of professional identity metamorphosis.

Employing the education theory ‘Threshold Concepts’ (Meyer & Land, 2003), I was interested in exploring the ‘troublesome’ aspects of learning during practice placements for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) students. I interviewed six ECEC practice placement supervisors and six final-year ECEC students to understand these troubles.

Following a narrative analysis of these interviews, I identified two principal learning challenges which arise for ECEC students during the early phase of practice placements. First, students must come to terms with an unfamiliar workplace culture. Second, students must learn to ‘find their voice’ to participate in preschool settings. These difficulties place cognitive, emotional and physical demands on ECEC students; these demands should not be underestimated.

Arguably, college educators do their students an injustice by not acknowledging, understanding and exploring the difficult aspects of placement learning. For a start, students will remain ill-prepared for their placement experiences. More widely, admitting that childcare work can be difficult for students aligns with a commitment to promote and normalise a wider discourse which acknowledges that childcare work can be challenging at times for every childcare worker. Consequently, identifying what students find difficult during practice placements enables us to reflect more generally on the supports which need to be put in place for childcare workers, to prevent a repeat of dangerous childcare practices witnessed on RTÉ’s Prime Time (television) programme (June 2013).

Keywords

Early Childhood Education & Care, Practice Placements, Threshold Practices, Communities of Practice

1. Introduction and Motivation

Ireland transformed its Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector¹ during the past ten years. Yet in a recent RTÉ Prime Time (television) programme (June 2013), the country witnessed poor and dangerous childcare practices within some Irish preschool agencies. A number of reasons have been offered to explain this lack of professionalism, including inadequate training programmes for practitioners. Unfortunately, we know little about the nature of the formative journey ECEC students undergo during practice placements - an important element of childcare training programmes. Accordingly, I became interested in finding out more about students' learning journeys. And so this paper presents some findings from a recent study² I undertook, which investigated the nature of key learning experiences for ECEC students during practice placements.

Specifically, this paper addresses the 'troublesome' aspects of students' learning journeys during the early phase of practice placements; students, arguably, need to navigate successfully these challenging experiences to start forming their professional identities. In addition to increasing our general awareness of the difficulties facing students on placement, the findings are likely to provide colleges and practice placement agencies with knowledge to prepare students better for their practice placement experiences. More precisely, the findings could be utilised to forewarn ECEC students about learning challenges during practice placements and to explore how these challenges can be tackled.

2. Methods

The study's principal aim was to understand more about ECEC students' key learning experiences during their practice placements. To achieve this aim, I identified theoretical and methodological objectives.

¹ For instance, the Irish State introduced a free, universal preschool year in ECEC in 2010; Síolta – the quality control framework for ECEC services – is being implemented; and Aistear, the Early Years' Curriculum, is now up and running. Moreover, hundreds of degree educated ECEC practitioners graduate every year from Irish higher-education colleges (see Mhic Mhathúna & Taylor, 2012, p.i)

² In the study I examined the nature of key threshold practices (see (Land et al., 2010, p. ix), focusing on their troublesome, transformative and integrative features, as well as examining what threshold practices look like.

Theoretical Objectives

I employed primarily the education theory 'Threshold Concepts' (Meyer and Land, 2003) to consider respondents' stories. Meyer & Land's theory has become popular among educationalists trying to make sense of critical learning moments for students studying academic subjects or for the professions. Threshold concepts' key proposition is that 'there are certain concepts, or certain learning experiences, which resemble passing through a portal, from which a new perspective opens up, allowing things formerly not perceived to come into view' (Land et al., 2010, p. ix). Going through the portal enables students to experience new ways of understanding the essential elements of a discipline or profession. For ontological reasons, in scientific subjects such as mathematics and physics it might make sense to identify 'threshold concepts', but in professions such as ECEC it makes more sense to discern the nature of 'threshold practices'. Threshold practices contain a number of features, one of which is that they are 'troublesome'. According to Land et al. (2010, p.x), 'depending on discipline and context, knowledge might be troublesome because it is ritualised, inert, conceptually difficult, alien or tacit, because it requires adopting an unfamiliar discourse, or perhaps because the learner remains "defended" and does not wish to change or let go of their customary way of seeing things.' So the primary theoretical objective in this study was to consider ECEC students' practice placement experiences in relation to these 'troublesome' features of threshold practices.

Lave & Wenger's work (1991) on communities of practice also influenced the theoretical approach to the study. Their work has been extensively applied to how apprentices and student practitioners learn in informal learning environments such as practice placements. They proposed a model of situated learning in which learning is contingent upon students participating in a community of practice. The nature of this participation is partly determined by the culturally specific form that participation takes within an organisation. The position of students early on in practice placements can be best described as one of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.108), where they are outsiders or novices in the agency.

Methodological Objectives

As practice placements normally consist of a series of events occurring over a defined time period, I felt a narrative approach³ would offer a suitable methodological vehicle to address the study's aim. As Murray (2003, p.116) noted, narratives allow us 'to define ourselves, to clarify the continuity in our lives and to convey this to others.' Narratives allow us to reflect on how experiences and activities impact on our identities and roles. For as Willig (2012, p.152) argued, 'it is through constructing narratives about their lives that people organise and bring meaning to their experiences.' In this study, telling stories provided respondents with opportunities to make sense of 'troublesome' practice placement activities and experiences. Unfortunately, there is no standard way of undertaking a narrative approach, as narrative researchers analyse stories in different ways, for example, by examining the structure, content and form of stories. In this study I examined the structure and content of narratives.

Narrative Structure

The principal approach used by narrative researchers is to look for the structure of narratives. The structural model (see Esin, 2011, p.104) examines how narrative is created and how different elements in the structure operate. The approach treats personal narratives as a text, which functions as a representation of past events in the form of a story. One focus of analysis in the structural model is on the way an event is told in a story⁴ text. Labov & Waletzky (in Esin, 2011, p.104) suggest a number of questions⁵ can be asked in a structural examination.

³ Willig (2012, p.153) suggested that all narrative research is based on the theoretical premise that telling stories is fundamental to human experience: by constructing narratives people make connections between experiences and come to understand these experiences in a way that becomes meaningful for them.

⁴ While there are many definitions of narratives and while some researchers distinguish between narratives and stories, I thought Esin's (2011, p.93) conceptualisation of narratives best served the study's aim: 'Narratives are stories with a clear sequential order, that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience. Story and narrative are often used interchangeably. Sequence is necessary for narrative. A narrative always responds to the question "And then what happened?"'

⁵ These questions are:

1. Abstract: What was this about?
2. Orientation: Who is the story about, when did it happen, what happened, where did it happen?
3. Complicated Action: Then what happened?
4. Result: What finally happened?
5. Evaluation: So what?
6. Coda: it functions to sign off the narrative as it returns to the present time of the telling.

Applying these questions, I undertook an analysis of the structure of respondents' narratives in this study. I examined how respondents made sense of a sequence of events, related to key learning experiences and professional identity formation. Labov & Waletzky's model (in Esin, 2011, p.104) assisted me to understand how respondents' framed key learning experiences, insofar that these experiences were likely to align with a series of executed, connected and reflected upon events. Understanding narrative structure in this way complemented the study's primary theoretical objective. Specifically, what impressed me about Land et al.'s (2010, p.ix) image of travel through a portal as a metaphor for key learning breakthroughs was a sense of the journey students need to undertake. Journeys imply action, perhaps a series of actions or experiences requiring negotiation; the journey through the portal also takes time to complete. Story structures help to reveal how people make sense of a series of events and experiences.

Content Analysis

A number of features are associated with conducting content analysis, but my main concern involved identifying themes within people's stories. The difference between a straightforward thematic analysis and a thematic analysis taking place within a narrative framework is that, in the latter, themes can be analysed in relation to sequences of events or experiences occurring over time. Identifying themes within a narrative framework therefore seemed appropriate to address the study's aim. Undertaking content analysis also served to meet my theoretical objective; I searched, for example, for troublesome elements of the threshold concepts' framework in respondents' stories⁶.

Brief Biographical Information on Respondents

I interviewed six final-year ECEC undergraduate degree students and six ECEC practice supervisors to hear their stories about what ECEC students found 'troublesome' during practice placements. I interviewed final-year ECEC students because they had undertaken two practice placements during their degree programme

⁶ My narrative approach, however, did not fully enable a 'transactional curriculum inquiry' (Cousin, 2008, p.211) to take place, in the sense that there was not a genuine dialogue between respondents and me on the nature of threshold concepts. Transactional curriculum inquiry has been an approach frequently employed in threshold concept inquiries. I justify not using this approach as it often requires researchers to have greater contact with respondents.

and would be in a position to reflect on aspects of their placements they found challenging. ECEC practice supervisors were interviewed because they could offer another perspective on the challenges facing students. A ‘topic guide’ (Arthur & Nazroo, 2003, p.112) structured how issues were addressed in interviews. Student interviews took place at their college. Supervisor interviews took place in their work settings. Interviews lasted between 20-90 minutes. I identified supervisors from my role as a visiting ECEC placement tutor. I explained the study to students in class, asking for volunteers to be interviewed. I reflected on how the power differential between my position and the respondents’ position could influence the findings. I also guaranteed respondents’ anonymity.

Student Respondents

ECEC students were undertaking a four-year undergraduate degree programme. On their programme, students undertake two thirteen-week ECEC practice placements in semesters four and six. Six final-year ECEC degree students were interviewed for this study in a college setting. I have given students the following pseudonyms: Haven, Avril, Una, Judy, Brid, Liz. I interviewed Haven and Avril together. Students were aged in their early 20’s, entering college after leaving secondary school. Student undertook the following types of practice placements (see Table 1).

Table 1: Types of Childcare Placements for Student Respondents

Student Pseudonyms	Practice Placement 1	Practice Placement 2
Haven	Community Childcare	Hospital
Avril	Community Childcare	Primary School
Una	Private Childcare	County Childcare Committee
Judy	Community Childcare	Community Childcare Abroad
Brid	Community Childcare	Community Centre
Liz	Private Childcare	County Childcare Committee

(n =6)

ECEC Supervisor Respondents

I interviewed six ECEC workplace supervisors and gave them the following pseudonyms: Maria, Marlene, Heidi, Allegra, Catherine, Josie.

Six ECEC supervisors were interviewed. These supervisors⁷ worked in ECEC settings in urban areas, west of Ireland.

3. Results

Instinctively we know that any practice placement can confront students with challenges. Poor placement preparation, inadequate supervision opportunities and an ill-defined placement role are potential hazards facing students from any social professional training programme. However, we need to know more about some of the specific challenges facing ECEC students on their practice placement learning journeys. Consequently, in this section I present two findings related to aspects of practice placements ECEC students find ‘troublesome’.

Entering an Unfamiliar Space

Not surprisingly, for those students who have had little or no previous childcare work experience, the first few weeks of a practice placement can be difficult. Judy, a student respondent, touched on the general discomfit students can feel upon entering the preschool environment. Reflecting back on her first practice placement, she noted how she felt engulfed early on in placement:

The few couple of week were overwhelming, didn't know what to do or anything because it was the first time that I was in a crèche and I hadn't a clue about whether I liked it or not...
(Judy, final-year ECEC student)

Perhaps in the early phase of placement, ECEC students share a common wish with wobblers in their care: both are trying to find their feet. ECEC students have departed familiar college territory and entered an unfamiliar space. They need to get to know

⁷ I interviewed Maria and Marlene together. They worked together in a not-for-profit community ECEC setting. At the time of the interview, Maria had worked in childcare for six years, Marlene for twelve years. Marlene had a childcare related degree; Maria did not. I interviewed Allegra and Catherine together. They also worked together in a not-for-profit community ECEC setting. Allegra held a childcare qualification (non-degree level) and had worked in childcare for fifteen years. Catherine held a childcare qualification (non-degree level) and had worked in childcare for twelve years. Heidi worked in a private (for profit) ECEC setting. She had worked in childcare for three years and had a childcare related degree. Josie worked in a community, not-for-profit ECEC setting. She had worked in childcare for five years and held a childcare qualification (non-degree level).

the ways of seeing and doing things of their placement agency (e.g. how children are welcomed to the setting; daily and weekly programmes; how rules and regulations impact on day-to-day work; etc.).

At the same time, the ECEC practice placement milieu can be particularly unsettling for students trying to compose themselves. For example, Heidi, a supervisor, highlighted the busyness and noisiness of the placement environment, conditions unfamiliar to many ECEC students, conditions with which they have to come to terms:

Well you have to see that a preschool setting is a very dynamic environment...it's very busy and...I mean busy as in many people think their workplace is busy but preschool you walk into the door and you're full-on until you leave again, so that's 8 hour full-on hard work...
(Heidi, supervisor)

The Challenge of 'Finding a Voice'

Marlene, a placement supervisor, depicted how students can become disorientated upon arriving in a placement setting, as 'it's all new territory'. Part of students' learning journey involved identifying how the placement organisation functioned, particularly so for students who have had little or no prior work experience within preschool settings. And part of this journey involves learning the language of childcare:

...okay what are the rules here, what am I dealing with? what's going on here?' and that's a lot, and certainly for somebody who has no professional work experience...they have nothing to compare it with, there is no language...they have no language they can talk...
(Marlene, supervisor)

Maria, a supervisor in a community preschool setting, suggested students became more communicative as they became more confident executing tasks. To illustrate the nature of this transformation, Maria offered an example of how ECEC students showed greater articulation over time concerning the agency task of transporting preschool children. Initially, at the beginning of placement, ECEC students can be 'really shy and have to be told to do something'. After a few weeks, students 'might think it but they wouldn't come out and say well maybe we should head off now...at the beginning, a lot of them wait to be told'. Later on, students start to say, 'oh, it's half-two, will I go on [i.e. preschool bus], whatever?'

Acquiring this understanding does not come quickly or overnight, so the early phase of placement can be particularly troubling for students, inducing difficult emotions and tiredness, as ECEC student Una reflected:

When I first went out on placement I used to find it so hard, I used to dread going in in the mornings, I used to hate it when they asked me to do things, I would be afraid that I would get it wrong or something, if I tried to take on or organise an activity myself...the first couple of weeks, I used to come home from work and fall on the couch, it was so tiring, and you stand on your feet all day and you don't get to sit down much.

(Una, final-year ECEC student)

However, Una's account demonstrated the benefit of adopting a narrative approach to appreciate how this challenging period can be overcome. Her narrative revealed the presence of troublesome, integrative and transformative features associated with the successful execution of a threshold practice. For instance, Una struggled early on during placement: she was afraid of undertaking activities and getting them wrong. After spending a number of weeks in the placement agency and becoming familiar with activities and routines, Una recollected that one day her manager said: 'You come in tomorrow with your own activity, you do it yourself with the children.' The next day she was nervous going into work, she told me. But after successfully implementing the activity, she was delighted.

Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the challenge for students to speak with ECEC practitioners to obtain permission to direct childcare activities. For instance, ECEC students such as Liz highlighted the reflective process involved in this task, demonstrating how difficult it can be for students to ask supervisors' permission to lead an activity:

Yeah, It was nerve-racking to know where your limits, how you can say 'can I do this?' or you know it's getting the confidence to say 'can I take this activity today?', or 'can I' - and then you're always thinking in the back of your mind you need to be supervised in everything you do and you need to make sure that you're not stepping the mark saying 'can I do this, but you need to stand and watch me', and you're not getting annoy-, well they need to be in the room with you obviously.

(Liz, final-year ECEC student)

At the same time there was a recognition that ECEC students differ in their capabilities, influencing how quickly they adapt to the practice placement environment. Specifically, Heidi, a practice supervisor, noted that students differ in their levels of personal resilience; consequently, students respond to placement setbacks in different ways:

...some other students might pick up on something that didn't work out and not exactly go the opposite way, but might take longer to re-fuel...so it depends very much on how they face challenges and how they work or figure out for themselves how something doesn't work out, how do I deal with this...that's sort of a way

(Heidi, supervisor)

In conclusion, the early phase of practice placements can be difficult for ECEC students. In addition to coming to terms with a noisy and unfamiliar working environment, they have to understand how agencies and personnel function. Before executing threshold practices, ECEC students need to grasp the organisational culture and practices operating in their placement settings. At the same time, students vary in their capability to do so.

4. Discussion

Despite studying ECEC subjects at college, many students enter the ECEC practice world as neophytes. The early days of placement can see students functioning in a 'liminal state', operating between two identities (Meyer & Land, 2005, p.374). They no longer embody the pre-placement student identity, but as they have not executed a threshold practice, knowing what it means to practise as an ECEC professional remains out of reach. Land et al. (2010, p.x) suggest the struggle to understand threshold concepts can leave learners in a 'stuck place', where understanding resembles a kind of 'mimicry' or 'lack of authenticity'. This liminal state for ECEC students is likely to occur during the early stages of a practice placement.

Respondents noted this phase can be a tiring and stressful time, as students observe and then start to perform agency functions, under the watchful eyes of a supervisor. The development of professional identity sees individuals becoming comfortable with a place, a comfort built on a sense of their capacity to share their knowledge and skills, a capacity to work well with others (Heikkinen, in Tamm, 2010, p.69). But ECEC students are discomfited by their surroundings, their lack of practice knowledge (see Trevithick, 2008, p.1230) and their unfamiliarity with how they are expected to interact with others. Becoming a professional childcare practitioner involves transcending this troublesome period.

What may in fact be happening during the early stage of placement is that ECEC students are struggling to learn how to participate in a community of practice. For example, in the findings section I noted supervisor Maria saying that ECEC students can be 'really shy and have to be told to do something' at the start of placement. I also highlighted the story of student Liz who found it difficult to ask her supervisor's permission to initiate an activity. These respondents described situations where students were struggling to participate legitimately and peripherally in their placement

agency (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.108). A key to legitimate peripheral participation is 'to learn to talk' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.108). But learning to talk provides students with a challenge: they have to adjust to the cultural form of participation the practice agency espouses. ECEC supervisor Marlene illustrated this point by describing how the early part of the journey involved students learning to understand the placement agency's rules and language, as 'they have no language they can talk'. By assimilating this language, students are trying to procure a set of cultural glasses more experienced ECEC practitioners wear. These glasses provide students with a means to perceive the world as ECEC practitioners do, to make decisions as ECEC practitioners do and eventually to take actions as ECEC practitioners do.

In conclusion, I agree with Irvine & Carmichael's (2009, p.104) proposition that threshold practices can be viewed 'as key elements of a community's shared repertoire'. But, as a teacher, I celebrate the troublesome feature of the threshold concepts' framework as it provides a way to reflect on the challenges students undergo to join a practitioner community.

5. Conclusions and Future Work

The educational theory 'Threshold Concepts' proposes that students on social professional training programmes such as ECEC must successfully execute threshold practices to begin to understand what it means to operate as ECEC practitioners. The threshold concepts' framework provides us with a schema to reflect on the learning journey students undergo to reach the stage of embarking successfully on these practices. This paper considered one element of the framework, namely what ECEC students find 'troublesome' during the early phase of practice placements.

ECEC students need to be reassured that they may find the early part of placement physically, emotionally and cognitively 'troublesome'. But over time, with the support of supervisors and through their own perseverance, students should settle, become familiar with routines and should successfully interact with younger children. While lecturers and supervisors are well placed to observe transformative learning journeys during practice placements, they should not minimise the challenges facing students early on in placement. Reflective approaches could be used to highlight, explore, accept and normalise these challenges. Lecturers and placement supervisors have a responsibility to 'service' (Waddell, 1989) students in the sense that

summative assessments and placement tasks needs to be identified and completed. But lecturers and placement supervisors also hold a responsibility to ensure that ECEC students on practice placements are 'served' (Waddell, 1989) in the sense that the effects of ECEC students' disorientation during practice placements are fully embraced.

The findings from this paper cannot be generalised due to the small sample size and the methodological approach. At the same time the findings suggest that further research needs to be undertaken to categorise more thoroughly the difficulties ECEC students encounter early on in practice placements and to identify ways to support students during this 'troublesome' phase.

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