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Investigating a theory of practice: Diploma students traversing their first professional experience placement at university. Preliminary findings.

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Abstract

There is a strong pattern whereby students who have already attained a Diploma in Children's Services from a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institution or a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) and subsequently enrol in a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Education) program experience challenges with their first professional experience unit (practicum) at university level. It appears that university requirements in terms of teaching expectations and written academic standards can often be challenging for diploma qualified students. Factors such as institutional structures, teaching styles and course content have been identified as key contributors to the difficulties faced by diploma qualified students. This small research project identified supports and constraints for diploma qualified students completing their first professional experience unit at university level. Utilising a phenomenological approach, diploma qualified students' theory of practice is investigated across three phases. Reporting on the first two phases of the study the researchers discuss findings from key stakeholders. The perspectives of students and TAFE teachers relating to the supports and constraints of completing an initial university professional experience placement are identified. The preliminary findings indicate that diploma qualified students do require additional support and information to support their transition into their first university practicum.

Introduction

Professional experience units are a compulsory component of Bachelor of Education programs across Australia. Students hoping to attain a Bachelor of Education, Early Childhood Education (birth to 12 years) at the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University are required to undertake a number of professional experience units over the duration of their study. These are Early Childhood Reflective Practice 1 (ECHP 122) in first year and Early Childhood Reflective Practice 2 (ECHP 222) in second year (Macquarie University, 2011). Additional professional experience units are undertaken in the third and fourth years. A student who has studied at a Technical and Further Education institution (TAFE) or a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) and obtained a Diploma in Children's Services can enter the Bachelor of Education (birth to 12 years) program at Macquarie University with credit for previous study. This includes credit for the first year professional experience unit. As such, the first professional experience unit undertaken by these students at university level is ECHP 222.

Academic staff members at the Institute of Early Childhood at Macquarie University have identified that there is a strong pattern whereby diploma qualified students struggle with their first professional experience unit at university level. It appears that university requirements in terms of teaching expectations and written academic standards can often be challenging for diploma qualified students. These anecdotal accounts are reinforced in several studies, with factors such as institutional structures, teaching styles and course content being identified as key contributors to the difficulties that are often faced by diploma qualified students upon

enrolment at university (Fuller & Chalmers, 1999; Whittington, Ebbeck, Diamond, & Yim, 2009).

Differences between TAFE, RTOs and university

TAFE and RTO teaching environments tend to focus on small group sizes with a high degree of staff and peer support available to students (Whittington et al., 2009). Conversely, university tutorial groups usually have between 25 to 30 students, and lectures are often presented to hundreds of students. This translates as less interaction and development of relationships with lecturers, tutors and peers (Whittington et al., 2009), and the expectation that at the university level students should take responsibility for their own learning, without close support and guidance. Thus diploma qualified students are encountering a different pedagogical environment which can be challenging for them.

Assessment requirements and expectations also vary greatly between TAFE and RTOs and university contexts. Additionally, it is widely acknowledged that there is variation between the content and quality of courses offered between training organisations (Early Childhood Australia [ECA], 2009; Productivity Commission, 2011). This creates potential disparity in student experiences prior to commencing at university and consequently the knowledge and understandings they bring with them. Diploma qualified students are generally more familiar with assessments that are based on observing competency, and therefore not usually graded (Fuller & Chalmers, 1999; Whittington et al., 2009). The differences in teaching and assessment methods are a result of the different purposes of the two institutions. Without sufficient supports many students may find the transition difficult to overcome due to the pedagogical differences that exist between TAFE and RTOs and university contexts.

Professional practice theory

Professional practice theory argues that professional practice is influenced by interconnections of cultural discourse, social political dimensions, and material and economic factors that are present to the individual (Kemmis, 2009; Smith, Edwards-Groves, & Brennan-Kemmis, 2010). As such, Bachelor of Education students who have diploma qualifications are developing complex and diverse relationships with both the university environment and early childhood practicum setting. As practice is both historically and socially structured (Kemmis, 2009) the background, values, knowledge, skills and experience of the diploma qualified student teacher will impact on how they approach their early university experiences, including their first professional experience placement. Therefore professional practice theory is a basis from which to investigate the diploma qualified students' construct of theory of professional practice, in terms of what they say, do and relate. Studies relating to diploma graduates who pursue early childhood teaching qualifications at university have identified that students with a TAFE and RTO background struggled more in their first year at university, rather than subsequent years (Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Dickson, 2000). It can be assumed that after the first year of study students are more familiar with the university context and requirements, and therefore more confident and able in subsequent years of study. Issues arise for these students when credit is obtained for first year subjects, meaning that second or third year subjects may be taken on without adequate academic experience, knowledge and understanding. Research often focuses on diploma qualified students generally (Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Fuller & Chalmers, 1999) or the broader issues faced by diploma qualified students who commence early childhood courses at university (Dickson, 2002; Gibson, Careen & Batt, 2002; Saracho & Spodek, 2007; Whittington et al., 2009). Little focus has been given to the issues faced by this cohort when they undertake professional experience units in their first year of university. While many of the key issues are still relevant in the professional experience context, further research which specifically focuses on the unique needs within this cohort and current issues within the sector is needed.

Current issues

The early childhood field is experiencing an ongoing shortage of university qualified early childhood teachers. Sumsion (2005) notes that this was initially recognised as an issue in 2002, and the Productivity Commission (2011) in their research report into the early childhood development workforce indicates that it remains a significant problem. The issue is multifaceted, however, two factors appear to predominate. These are issues with attracting qualified teachers into early learning settings, and difficulties in retaining them. Thorpe, Ailwood, Boyd & Brownlee (2011) discuss how the majority of the Bachelor of Education (ECE) students interviewed as part of their research expressed an intention to work within the school system, with only a few students indicating that they would work in early childhood settings. Teaching in schools usually offers higher remuneration as well as better working conditions such as less face to face hours, more holidays and greater access to professional development (Productivity Commission, 2011). Furthermore, Fenech, Waniganayake and Fleet (2009) discuss the often less appealing conditions within prior to school settings and high levels of staff turnover. These workplace issues are widely recognised within the early childhood field (ECA, 2009; Productivity Commission, 2011).

In recognition of these issues the Government has allocated significant additional funding to create an additional 1500 university places specifically for early childhood teachers (DEEWR, n.d.). The current government initiatives extend beyond increasing university places. It is acknowledged that strategies for attracting and retaining university qualified early childhood teachers must extend further than subsidising university places (Productivity Commission, 2011). Beyond financial incentives, educators must understand the importance and value of teaching younger children, despite the lack of esteem often aligned with the position. Early Childhood Australia (2009) identify that supporting diploma qualified educators to increase their qualifications is an effective way of building the number of qualified teachers in early childhood who also have significant experience in the sector. Active measures need to be taken to increase the number of graduates who are interested in working in early childhood settings, and supporting diploma qualified educators to further their formal qualifications is a logical strategy.

Dickson (2002) notes an ongoing increase in the number of students choosing the diploma to degree pathway to achieve teaching qualifications at university, however more recent data is not available. It can be postulated that progressively more diploma qualified educators will seek to attain a Bachelor of Education (ECE) in light of regulatory changes that are taking place. Under the new National Quality Standards all long day care centres and pre-schools will be required to employ a university qualified teacher, a change in requirements that will be effective from January 2014 (COAG, 2009). These changes to the regulations are in line with current research and early childhood philosophies which indicate that positive outcomes for children are linked with higher levels of teacher qualification (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2009; Thorpe et al, 2011, Whittington et al., 2009). Additionally university qualified teachers are needed to facilitate the Government's commitment to "universal access" to preschool. This initiative aims to provide all children in Australia with 15 hours per week of preschool during the year prior to commencing school (Productivity Commission, 2011, p. 15). Again this highlights the need to support diploma qualified educators in their transition to gaining further qualifications.

Methodology

As a phenomenological approach observes phenomena through the eyes of participants and creates opportunities for new understandings (Lester, 2001; van Manen, 1990), in phase one, semi structured interviews were held with all participants to ascertain information needs and support structures for diploma graduates. Seventeen students of a possible 48 diploma qualified students (33%) enrolled in ECHP222 chose to participate in the project. Of these

students nine identified as having teaching practice from only previous practicums, whereas seven identified as also having experience from working in the sector. Two teachers from TAFE institutions and whose students have transitioned to the university degree also consented to be interviewed. This provided information and insight into the content and context that the diploma qualified students experience in their previous programs of study. Interviews with both groups of participants ranged from three to 15 minutes with six minutes being the average. Data from interviews were transcribed in verbatim and analysed with the use of QSR NVivo version 9.2. Based on the analysis of interviews the project team developed two workshops for students. These workshops were conducted in phase two and unpacked: early childhood theories; writing observations and planning; the *Early Years Learning Framework*; and discussed the university expectations for student teachers on professional experience. Data at this stage has not been collected to identify why students chose not to participate, nor if there is a difference between students who have previous experience working in the field opposed to the students who have transitioned straight from TAFE. This will be examined and discussed in future publications.

Phase three included interviews with all diploma qualified student participants after they had completed professional experience. This was to identify supports and constraints to the project and to evaluate what changes could be implemented to support diploma qualified students' success on professional experience. Data from all interviews will be transcribed and analysed with the assistance of QSR NVivo. Statistical comparisons of a successful professional experience (passing this component) will be made between diploma qualified students who participated in the project and those who chose not to.

Results

The results from phase one and two of this study are reported in this paper. The interviews with the diploma qualified students and TAFE teachers were conducted to identify students' needs for their first university professional experience placement. These were addressed under the following research questions:

1. What information do diploma qualified students need prior to the commencement of their first university professional experience placement?
2. What practices are diploma qualified students concerned about prior to their first university professional experience placement?

Information needed prior to first university professional experience placement

The main issues identified included knowing how to meet the university requirements, implementing the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF), and other knowledge such as time management skills and managing the workload.

University Standards and Expectations

The majority of the students interviewed (15 of the 17 participants) identified that knowledge about how to meet university-level standards, requirements and expectations was the most important information they needed prior to their first university professional experience placement. The information they identified as necessary included knowing how to write observations (including what observational formats to follow) and how to plan. The students further identified that they needed clarity around the difference in expectations. For instance students stated:

It's just the whole expectation and exactly what I need to do because it was so different and when we were doing the observations with the class, the [anecdotal] records, that format was completely different to the one that we did at TAFE (Student 12).

Since this is going to be my first prac for uni I feel like I need to know what is expected from me. I need to have a clear idea what the expectations are, what the difference between this prac and diploma prac [is]... I feel like I need to know exactly what is required from me (Student 16).

The TAFE teachers also agreed that the university expectations were a challenge for these students. Teacher 1 stated:

Students struggle with what the university expectations are for practicum. The student's role is a little bit different to TAFE, because basically when they do TAFE work placement we don't have any funds to pay for cooperating teacher services.

The students suggested that being given university-level samples of work would help clarify these differences in expectations for them. The students indicated that these written examples needed to include how to write observations and plans, and the formats that are acceptable to use:

With the observations – how to write an observation [chart] proficiently for the Macquarie University standard; from just the normal anecdotal jotting to actually planning an experience. That would be great if we could get some help with that... I'm just really worried about the written work and the written performance (Student 2).

A lot of the wording of lectures and tutors about academic writing is informative, but it's terrifying to know actually what – how that fits with your own thinking – what is academic writing for me, and the expectation of... we have to do it in our own style, and that style has to be academic (Student 4).

Two students further suggested that having samples which exemplified university standards and expectations would be of beneficial support:

You've got to create your own style, but it's hard to create your own style when you really don't know what people want... it's hard for you to make your own style because you're just – you're petrified that it's not going to make the grade. So examples are really good (Student 4).

The TAFE teachers also identified the standard of writing and linking this to theories of learning is something that TAFE students can struggle with.

I think probably the area that, from my experience, most of them would struggle with would be the theory behind what they're doing. The curriculum theory, developmental theory, all of that. I think that's probably where they need to - would have to be clear on how much information that they need and how much research they should be doing. I think that would be one of their weaknesses, generally (Teacher 2).

Particularly, one student noted that the structure/pathway of their studies required such information (about university level standards) as the completion of the diploma exempted them from certain university level subjects:

My main concern is that being exempt from the first unit of prac and having to do my second year prac this year I'm just worried that the expectations will be a lot more different – I'm not too confident because I didn't do my first year prac so I don't know what to expect (Student 10).

The Early Years Learning Framework

Outside of addressing university level requirements, the second most significant factor identified by four students was related to knowledge and information about the EYLF:

Even though I'm familiar with writing observations, I'm actually not familiar with referencing and theorists and the EYLF (Student 14).

It's so important to be really well read, with up and coming standards and the EYLF. I think you need to be a bit attuned... to show all the stuff happening with education at the moment (Student 6).

Other knowledge needed

Two students also identified information about the management of time and workload whilst on practicum placements was important:

How to manage my time... just a guide as to what kind of amount of work we should do each night would be helpful (Student 13).

How to manage prac properly... like the workload – so what we're given and how we're meant to be doing it (Student 9).

One student also mentioned that having knowledge about useful resources for practicum placements would be beneficial:

Maybe what kind of resources that we should have already in terms of our experiences or if it's in terms of referencing books or children's stories and things... that we should just have (Student 7).

Prior experience and holistic/integrating practices were also deemed important by one student. This student suggested:

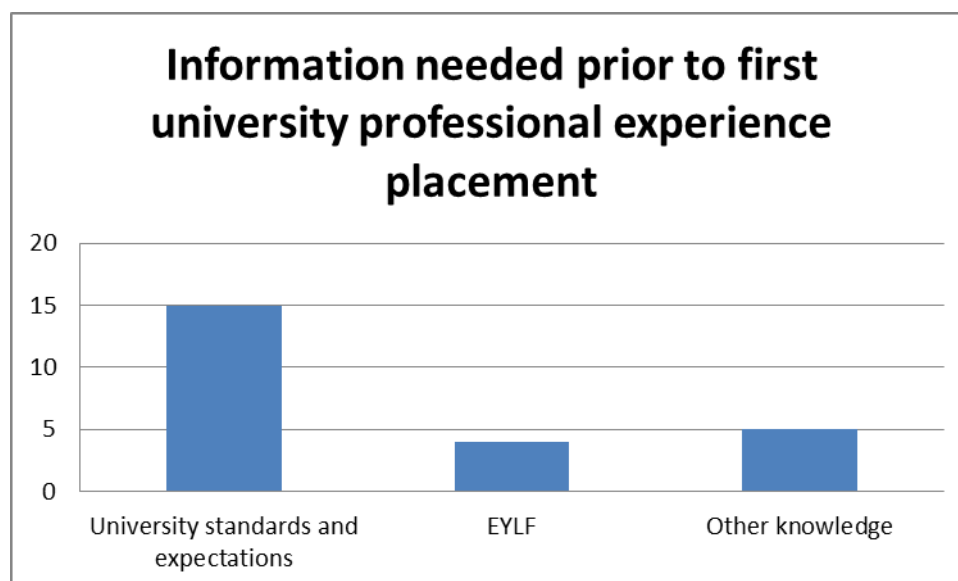
I think you need to have on the job experience... theoretically and academically passing them [the subjects], I don't think that's enough... I almost feel like for those subjects, they need to be... incorporated into prac (Student 6).

One student also identified that awareness of centre and staff policies and practices was important information to have prior to the commencement of a practicum:

It's important to know about the centre policy... emergency procedures, children with any special needs or allergies. It's important to meet the staff as well, if they can just pop in to the centre or call the centre just so they can introduce themselves. It's important for them to know how to be professionally dressed... how to be professional and how to bring your ideas and thoughts without discrediting their centre policy (Student 15).

An overview of student's perceptions regarding what information is needed prior to practicum commencements is portrayed below in figure 1.

Figure 1 Student perceptions of information needed prior to practicum commencement



Practices concerned about prior to first university professional experience placement

The participants were asked to identify practices that were of concern prior to the practicum placement. Practices identified included meeting expectations of the practicum, documentation requirements of practicum, understanding relationships with the cooperating teachers and university advisors.

Meeting expectations of practicum

Similar to the above findings, nine students were concerned about meeting expectations of the practicum and unit at a university standard, this involved:

The differences in observations between TAFE and uni, as well as what – because at TAFE there were certain experiences that... were more activities than experiences, with knowing what uni and... what the kind of expectations is on that as well (Student 7).

Just how different it will be from – compared to TAFE to what uni expectations are. That's my main concerns (Student 9).

Documentation requirements of practicum

Closely related to this concern, eight students identified written components to pose concerns. This included general concerns about written work, documentation, assignments and academic writing:

The children and everything is fine, it's just the actual written work that I'm just a bit concerned about (Student 1).

What I'm most concerned about is... referring back to the EYLF and also referencing and referring to different literature and theorists (Student 14).

The EYLF also posed concerns for 4 students, who observed:

Just observations... as well as like how to interpret and how to bring in the early years learning framework (Student 5)

I guess also because EYLF is new I haven't actually worked in the centre and done programming with it yet (Student 14)

Understanding relationships with the cooperating teachers and university advisors

Working with teachers who may have different styles of educating and interacting within centres was also an identified concern (n=1). This student noted:

I have worked with the professional, older style teaching teachers, and to come in and expect them to all sort of sit down and allow you to take control of their environment – it's a worry (Student 4).

The TAFE teachers identified the different roles the cooperating teacher and university advisor has in university placements and how this can be confusing for the students initially.

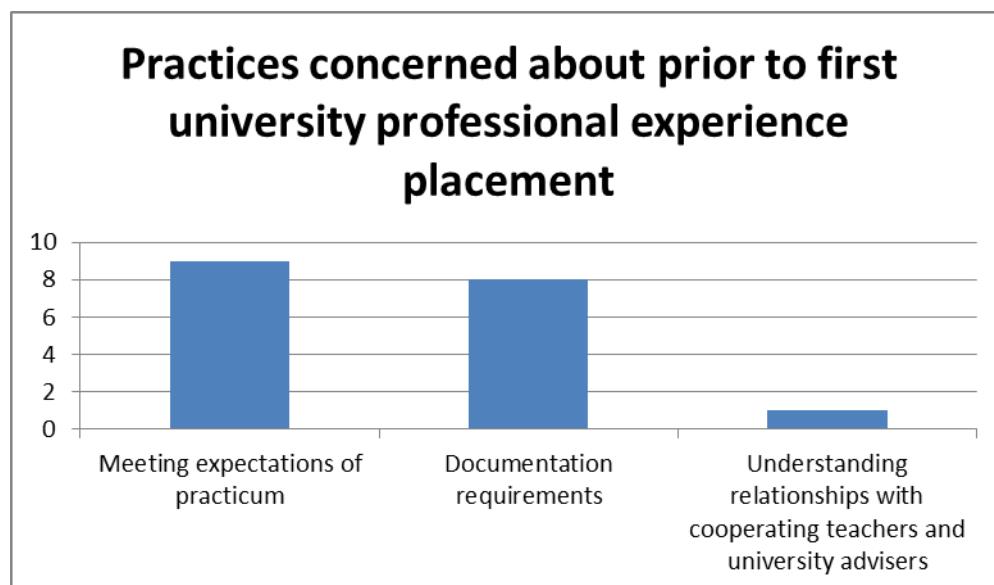
I think one of the things they might struggle with a little bit is the role of the advisor and the supervisor, supervising teacher, because that's very different to what they've had in their previous work placement. Because at TAFE they do - it's all competency based - and the assessment that comes out from TAFE is all assessment based, and that's quite different (Teacher 2).

TAFE teachers also identified institutional and systematic differences between university and TAFE education experienced by students. The difference between lectures and tutorials can be confusing for the student initially. Also there was a perception that students were more able to approach their TAFE teachers compared to the university teachers, due primarily to smaller class sizes:

I think some of them also feel that some of the university lecturers are not as approachable as what the TAFE teachers are, but as we explained to them it's a different type of learning institution (Teacher 1).

An overview of student's perceptions regarding practices students are concerned about prior to practicum commencements is portrayed below in figure 2.

Figure 2: Practices concerned about prior to first university professional experience placement



Discussion

For diploma qualified students who will complete a university professional experience unit in their first year of university there are several elements that are necessary to facilitate their successful engagement and completion of the unit. The pre interviews from within this study confirm the need for diploma qualified students to receive additional support upon entry to university. Such support should include orientation and support programs that help students become familiar with university requirements, processes and academic standards. This could include information on university facilities such as libraries and lecture theatres, information on teaching styles, and the standard of work required for assessments (Dickson, 2000). Research that further supports this claim indicates that diploma qualified students who participated in induction or support programs experienced positive outcomes such as increased academic success and an enjoyment of their studies (Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Whittington et al., 2009).

Currently Macquarie University presents a foundation unit for first year students which provides an overview of writing styles, referencing systems and also an introduction to professional experience placements (Macquarie University, 2011). While this may help with the initial transition process experienced by diploma qualified students, it does not specifically provide an effective bridge between practical experience at the TAFE or RTO level, and requirements at a university level. More specific support programs are required to help diploma qualified students understand the university requirements and subsequently achieve successful outcomes in professional experience units. Several students suggested that an induction for diploma qualified students would be beneficial for future students:

Furthermore, for effective development of support programs it is important that university academics have clear understandings of the TAFE and RTO settings from which students have come (Whittington et al., 2009). University academics also need to gain input from students to understand their theories of professional practice and the knowledge they bring from previous contexts. This is especially important given the diversity present between training institutions. Thus ongoing discussions with staff from TAFE and RTO institutions are essential to provide further insights into how students can best be supported.

Furthermore diploma qualified students have identified issues around communication as being problematic. Primarily, they perceive university lecturers to be distant and unapproachable (Whittington et al., 2009). Support programs that seek to provide new students with a familiar academic staff member whom they can contact when necessary will address this need. Additionally, the familiar academic can also provide advice on how to communicate with other lecturers and tutors, and also guidance on how to find information independently. Such an approach has the ability to empower students and to support them to be successful in their studies as well as their careers. Creating support networks and communication skills may further support diploma qualified students as they undertake their first professional experience placement at a university level.

Another aspect that the results reveal is that diploma qualified students' find the lack of academic support difficult. This notion was supported by TAFE teachers, who discussed how students found the larger classes and less time with university teachers difficult after being in the TAFE an RTO environment. Suggestions included providing a buddy or mentoring system to support students.

Diploma qualified students also identified the need for more information on the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). This is unsurprising given it is a recent policy development. In Australia the political landscape in early childhood is changing and with this regulatory change a new mandatory national curriculum framework, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), was released in 2009. All early childhood settings must implement the EYLF to meet the national standards (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2011). Students and the field alike face the challenge of implementing this new framework and many students noted that they had only learnt about the previous framework that guided their practices (The NSW Curriculum Framework).

The initial data from this small project supports the limited research in this area. Diploma qualified students require support when traversing their first university professional experience placement. Their theory of practice needs to be recognised and they need to also be made aware of the university's expectations and practices. This requires rethinking how these students are supported and mentored at the beginning of their university degree.

Conclusion

Universities generally have a responsibility to provide suitable support across all aspects of study. While this is relevant to all students, there is a need for university courses to be responsive to diverse student backgrounds and needs when undertaking professional experience placements. Students who make the transition between diploma courses and university studies should be supported to develop an understanding of the tertiary environment and academic requirements. The preliminary findings from this study highlight students need to understand university requirements; in terms of the expected standards, ways of completing tasks and written components. Students also highlighted issues surrounding the EYLF and TAFE teachers discussed institutional differences between universities and TAFE and RTOs that may contribute to difficulties faced by students. This small study illuminates that is essential for universities to equip diploma qualified students with academic writing skills, clear expectations of what is required on university professional placements (including formats and examples), and guidance on how to communicate effectively with university teachers.

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