16. Међународна научна конференција
Промена парадигме
У образовању и науци

16. Nemzetközi tudományos konferencia
Paradigmaváltás
az oktatásban és a tudományban

16. Međunarodna naučna konferencija
Promena paradigme
u obrazovanju i nauci

16th International Scientific Conference
Changing Paradigms
in Education and Science

16. Међународна научна конференција
Промена парадигме у образовању и науци
Зборник радова

Датум одржавања: 3–4. новембар 2022.
Место: Учитељски факултет на мађарском наставном језику,
Суботица, ул. Штросмајерова 11., Република Србија.

16. Nemzetközi tudományos konferencia
Paradigmaváltás az oktatásban és a tudományban
Tanulmánygyűjtemény

A konferencia időpontja: 2022. november 3–4.
Helyszíne: Újvidéki Egyetem Magyar Tannyelvű Tanítóképző Kar,
Szabadka, Strossmayer utca 11., Szerb Köztársaság.

16. Međunarodna naučna konferencija
Promena paradigme u obrazovanju i nauci
Zbornik radova

Datum održavanja: 3–4. novembar 2022.
Mesto: Učiteljski fakultet na mađarskom nastavnom jeziku,
Subotica, ul. Štrosmajerova 11., Republika Srbija.

16th International Scientific Conference
Changing Paradigms in Education and Science
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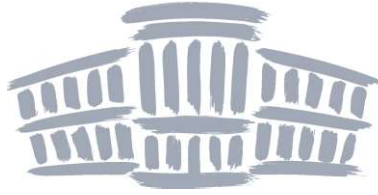
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FROM SETTING TO STRATEGY: A STUDY INTO PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION OF EXPERIENCED EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS, A 'PARADIGM SHIFT' ON TWO LEVELS.

Abstract

Research was carried out on the Isle of Wight, in the United Kingdom, to determine the impact of Higher Education (HE) in childhood studies as studied at a Further Education (FE) college. The original aims were to find out what a childhood studies graduate 'looks like' and what degrees in the sector offer employers. It also set out to evaluate the impact of the Graduate Practitioner Competences (GPCs) offered by HE providers. Research took the form of focus groups with childhood studies undergraduates and on analysis. The participants focus was on professional progression and personal development beyond the early years setting. Findings pointed to an appreciation of the skills and abilities of childhood graduates by managers but, once embarked on HE programmes, Early Years (EY) practitioners tend to look to develop their careers beyond the setting they are employed. The participants used their degrees to move away from the role of EY practitioner into more 'professional' positions such as teaching and social work. It was not possible to evaluate the impact of GPCs in the way intended, because the participants had little knowledge of this initiative (ECSDN, 2018). This constitutes a paradigm shift in two ways: first, students begin to see the opportunities available to them and look for career development, and second, the research on this group took a different direction to that first anticipated. It began to focus not on the impact of HE on practitioners in the ECEC workforce, but on the perceived benefits to practitioners in terms of career progression and self-satisfaction. It is recommended that for further research on GPCs be carried out on practitioners at earlier stages in their careers.

Key Words: *Isle of Wight, Graduate Practitioner Competences, Paradigm Shift*

1. Introduction

This research examines the perspectives of a particular cohort of early childhood students studying at Isle of Wight (IOW), and their views on the benefits of higher education (HE) on practice in early years (EY) settings. The participants are all mature students and experienced EY practitioners who have made decisions to embark on first a Foundation Degree. After successful completion, they progressed to Top Up year to give them a full bachelor's degree (BA). It also focuses on Graduate Practitioner Competences (GPCs) (ECSDN, 2018) and how these can enhance EY practice.GPCs were developed to enhance practice and help to raise the profile of early years professionals with a view to further professionalising the sector (Fairchild et al., 2022). A narrative approach was used to hear the participants voices through focus group method with 12 students in two separate sessions. This allowed the cohort the freedom to answer questions in their own way. What was found during this research was that students showed a tendency to use higher education (HE) strategically rather than for their current practice, and this led to a shift in the emphasis of the research. This resulted in a paradigm shift on two levels.

2. Background

Research has already highlighted the benefits of a graduate early years workforce and its impact on the children in their care (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008; Sylva et al., 2010; Archer & Oppenheim, 2001); however, despite the breadth of research evidence, there has been limited appetite for policy makers to change the qualification requirement in non-compulsory provision (DfE, 2021b). Policy mandates that a level 3 vocational accreditation is sufficient to work with young children in England (DfE, 2021b), which contrasts with other age phases of education (primary school for example) where a graduate level qualification is required (Hevey, 2013). There are around 328,500 practitioners in the early years sector and an estimated 62,000 providers in England (DfE, 2021). Of these more than twice as many providers are in the private sector than in schools or the 'maintained' sector. Four fifths of staff are qualified to at least level 3, and inschool-based settings 32% were qualified to degree level in 2021. In private and voluntary group-based settings the proportion of graduates is 11%. Pay reflects the levels of qualifications with 12 % of staff with school providers and 18% of group-based staff earning less than the National Living Wage (NLW) (DfE, 2021). Figures from the Department for Education (2022) show higher average staff turnover than before the COVID 19 pandemic in early years settings, with 28% in group-based settings (GPBs) and 11% for school-based settings (SPBs). Just over half (55%) of SBP's reported a 0% turnover rate, compared with 28% of GBPs. The reasons staff have left settings since the pandemic are for GPBs lack of career progression (42%), a better work-life balance/ less stressful job (34%) and better and more suitable working hours (32%). For SBPs the reasons also included better pay (47%).

Against this background, the Early Childhood Studies Degree Network (ECSDN) is encouraging early years staff to achieve Graduate Practitioner Competences (GPCs) (ECSDN, 2022). Among the aims of the ECSDN are to:

- Campaign for a high-status early childhood graduate profession.
- To provide a critical perspective on and a forum for the advancement of appropriate early years policies, initiatives, and legislation.
- To develop graduate and postgraduate level education, training, and research in the field of Early Childhood Studies.

As well as the aims, the ECSDN also seek to promote academic and professional developments and develop Early Childhood Studies (ECS) as an academic and professional discipline in HE. It aims to work towards the integration of ECS within other early childhood academic and professional initiatives, both nationally and internationally and promote pay recognition and acceptance by employers of early childhood academic and professional qualifications (Fairchild et al., 2022). The ECSDN acknowledges that Early Childhood degrees have been awarded for more than 25 years, but also that these degrees vary substantially in their content and the need for placements to assess the practice of EY practitioners at graduate level (ECSDN, 2018). GPCs are an attempt to offer the opportunity to students to practice and be assessed at graduate level in an early years settings. They promote the critical application of theory to practice and holistic knowledge and understanding of the ecology of child development in family, community, and wider socio-politicalcontexts. GPCs are set at level 6, for students to demonstrate the ability to apply, critically evaluate and communicate theoretical knowledge to practice (ECSDN, 2018), to provide a standardised method of assessed practice across the wide range of early childhood degrees. However, GPCs are optional and do not necessarily carry HE credits, but the aim is for employers to start expecting that graduates in early years have achieved GPCs, to create a demand for these higher-level skills.

It is in this environment that this research has taken place. It seeks to find out what staff in the ECEC sector think of HE and what they will do with the degree once they have completed their studies. Therefore, the aim of the of project is 'To explore the ECEC sectors perspectives of ECS degrees (FD and BA Hons Top Up) and ECS graduates on Isle of Wight'. It seeks to map the terrain on the IOW by through relevant local and national policy, to consider what a graduate 'looks like' and what ECS degrees offer the sector in IOW, to consider perceptions of the of the graduate practitioner, and to identify implications for the delivery of HE in ECS, both Foundation Degree and BA Hons Top Up, and the inclusion of Graduate Practitioner Competencies within ECS degree programmes.

3. The research

The findings of this research are part of a research project being conducted on the Isle of Wight (IOW) in the United Kingdom. They are the results of the first stage of research, and therefore are preliminary findings that stand at the time of writing but when further research has taken place, more substantial findings will be available. Through exploring the aim, the expectation was to provide a better understanding of how the ECEC sector can contribute to the notion of 'graduate-ness' and 'graduate skills', and to have a greater understanding of the ECS degrees and placement provision. It was hoped that with a better understanding of the sector needs universities can ensure that EY undergraduates and graduates are prepared for placements during their studies, and their transitions to work, or positions of greater responsibility. Additionally, it was hoped to use the findings to refine/tailor the programme universities offer to current and prospective students which have routes into employment. There is some debate about what 'graduate-ness' means. In general, level six (the final year of a bachelor's degree), students should be able to think critically about abstract concepts in their field, in this case childcare, and use primary sources to construct arguments (Quality Assurance Agency, 2022a; 2022b). Other sources emphasise more general skills, not necessarily connected to a sector or subject area. For example, the Office for Students (2022) highlight abilities such as networking, securing employment and preparing for job interviews, and employers also look for generic skills such as self-reliance, including willingness to learn and self-promotion, people skills including teamworking and interpersonal skills, and general skills including problem solving and flexibility. This is sought after as well as specialist subject skills (Graduate Recruitment Bureau, 2022). This distinction between subject specific abilities and general graduate skills became significant in the analysis of the data.

3.1 Participation

The sample included 12 EY practitioners f rom a range of EY settings across the IOW. The participants were studying at a Further Education (FE) college through a partnership with a university in mainland England, as no actual university exists on the IOW. The sample are all female, and this is not too dissimilar from the national picture of between 2% and 3% of males in the early year's workforce (DfE, 2019). This is despite efforts to increase the male presence in the sector (Warin et al., 2020). This compares with the international average of 3% (Brody, 2015) and the OSCD rate for pre-primary teachers across OECD (2020) countries at 3.2%. The sample varied in age with the youngest in the 18-24, and the oldest in the 45-54 age groups. This reflects the picture in England; five of the sample were under 34 years of age whereas in England overall, 40% are under 30 years old. The sample practised in a range of settings; this includes half from the private/ voluntary/ independent sectors and the other half from 'maintained' settings (legally constituted as schools) (DfE, 2019). The second half also included one 'Academy', a school that receives funding directly from the government and is operated by an academy trust (Gov.UK., no date). The sample were divided almost equally between schools and early years settings, and all white British. The sample was taken from a group studying for a 'Top Up' (i.e., the third year of a degree in Early Childhood which is equivalent to level 6), and unsurprisingly the highest qualification all of them held was the Foundation Degree in Early Childhood. All the sample volunteered to take part in the research.

3.2 Research method

The research was conducted through a narrative approach and the method used was two separate focus groups, each including half (six) of the group. A narrative approach was chosen because it was the story of the participants that was sought (Riessman, 2000). It was felt that this is a relatively un-researched topic and an almost 'forgotten' group of students, and a narrative style promised to access the 'omniscient, authorial voice' (Bruner, 2004: 702). The sample have a distinct story to tell about their experiences and oral literature would provide understanding of the forms and functions rooted in their cultural contexts, scenes, and events (Bauman, 1986). It was anticipated that this group of practitioners had not planned the outcomes of their professional lives, that they had 'stumbled' or fallen into the roles they have arrived at, due to their backgrounds and family situations, and that although their stories might seem simple and straightforward, there was more complexity than first appears. So, there was an attempt not only to allow the actors to make meaning of their situations and capture the vividness of their experience, but also to make the familiar strange, 'rescue it from

obviousness' (Bruner, 1986). As their experiences were expected to be intricate and perhaps sensitive, the narrative approach was also used to meet their psychological needs (Gibbs, 2007) and to gain the same insights as from an interview (Thody, 1997), but with less formality, and a group approach. The group approach was achieved by using the increasingly popular in educational research (Cohen et al., 2011), focus group method.

The focus group method was selected initially for practical reasons. Due to restraints such as family and childcare responsibilities, it was economical on time, and a large amount of data was expected in the limited time available (Hyden and Bulow, 2003). Fifty minutes was allotted for each of two groups of six students, as recommended for educational research (Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999). Although the data generated was less than would be expected from individual interviews, the benefits of the collective view (Morgan, 1988: 9) and the meeting of the psychological and social needs of the students (Gibbs, 2007) compensated for this. One of the benefits of focus groups is the bringing together of people previously unknown to each other (Hyden and Bulow, 2003), but in this case, all the students in the two focus groups knew each other from being taught together. Bearing in mind the psychological and social needs of the students, it was considered appropriate for them to be familiar with each other to encourage the generation of a collective view. The focus group method allowed themes to develop and attitudes and opinions to emerge (Hyden and Blow, 2003) without domination from the facilitators (Morgan, 1988: 9). Skilful facilitation (Smithson, 2000) was needed to listen to each member and hear a range of views, and minimise domination by some, or neglection of others (Newby, 2010: 350). This prevented controversial views to be suppressed (Smithson, 2000), and contributed to the overall outcome of the 'paradigm shift' through which the participants explained their reasons for embarking on a further education programme, not to gain skills in the ECEC field they operated in, but to progress to other associated areas of ECEC and education. Had the focus group method not been used, this may have been missed. The focus groups were conducted in a room familiar to the participants, they were video recorded (with appropriate consent) and the verbal data was transcribed for analysis. The two facilitators were also familiar to the participants and all these factors contributed to a sense of rapport where a degree of understanding, trust and respect (Becker and Bryman, 2004) was engendered between the participants and then facilitators.

The questions for the two focus groups were open to allow the participants to tell their stories (Bruner, 2004). The questions asked generally about their settings and moved on to discuss the role and expectations of graduates and undergraduates, before asking about the Graduate Practitioner Competences (ECSDN, 2018) and perceptions of this initiative. However, one of the aims was to allow the participants to relate to their experiences and freedom was given for them to influence the agenda.

4. Findings
Overall, three main themes emerged from the research, (i) logistical and financial (ii) professional (iii) personal; and these themes are presented below.

4.1. Logistical and financial
Many of the group stated the costs of travelling to a university on the English mainland, and the impact on family and other responsibilities, as restrictive in terms where to study. One stated that it was a:
   B3 Cheap way to get a degree/ stay on the IW.

Another claimed that they:
   A2 feel disadvantaged because they have children and other commitments.

However, there were other reasons that travelling to mainland England was not seen as viable. One stated:
   B1 I haven't got the mental capability to leave (the Isle of Wight).

For some the option of distance learning was not as attractive as face-to-face learning. Participants also saw financial benefits as studying locally meant that travelling costs to the mainland were saved.

Some stated that without the opportunity to study at the IOW College, they would not have engaged with higher education.

4.2. Professional

Some stated that they started in HE to improve their practice in early years. One student stated that the role of early years practitioner was where she was 'needed', and emphasised the necessity:
B5 to learn about children/ gain confidence in working with children/ to do job better

Another stated:
A2 It's just changed my whole perspective in my role.

However, most viewed HE as a way of developing their careers by changing their role. This was especially the case as they realised the options for progressing to other employment, as they progressed on the programme.However, some felt that early years' graduates could be recruited to positions which required only level 3 qualifications, and therefore felt a level of exploitation, saying:
A2: on the IW, schools advertise a lower level and take graduates for lower-level work

A6: Schools recruit staff that need level 3 for their job, from graduates, to do higher level work (ie teachers) for the same Terms and Conditions.

Even so, the UK Foundation Degree model, where it is possible to work and earn while studying (Mikuska, 2016), was welcomed and all would recommend the programme to other childcare practitioners. The post- Higher Education ambitions of the group indicate that achievement in higher education leads students to consider career options beyond that of early years practitioner or learning assistant. Common destinations for the groups are professions such as teaching and social work, but also include occupational therapy and psychologist. There was a level of regret that more options are not available on the IW, but some were pleasantly surprised at the possibilities available for graduates in general. Most saw the procurement of a degree as a way to develop their careers in the ECEC workforce beyond the nursery/ reception class.Two stated:
B1 to go into a different route from early years, but still work with children

B5 The Top up has opened doors- for example to study for the Certificate of Education

Also, one explained that Higher education had opened new, unforeseen, possibilities as she:
B1 originally wanted to go into mental health (to understand my own background and others), but now I am happy to see where it takes me.

One participant claimed that the professional benefits of higher education had already paid off:
A4 it helped me progress because I was just a bank support worker and I'm now home coordinator.

Those students who held managerial or supervisory roles welcomed the skills and abilities that early childhood HE provides, such as depth of understanding, communication, and team-working, but most of the group looked beyond the early years setting on achievement of a degree. Interestingly, none of the group were aware of the role/ status of those holding Graduate Practitioner Competences.

4.3.Personal

All the group stated benefits to studying in HE, was 'worth doing'. Many stated personal reasons for starting in HE; these varied from the 'love of studying' to validation to self and others. One was keen:
B5 to show the family I am studying, he can see me studying, and I can see him doing it.

Other benefits of undertaking higher education included a distraction from the rigours of life. One stated:
A1 It helped, it helped just to be busy all the time.

These views developed from the confidence they gained as they progressed in the programme. In terms of personal benefits, students stated that the return to learning was valuable, some thought the degree has its own value beyond professionaldevelopment and would encourage any practitioners to embark on the programme.One stated:
B1 I am a different person- more confident.
….and another found out about herself by:
B6 realising that I am quite capable (academically).

The impact on the students' self-concept was notable. One stated that she had a bright future because the experience of higher education had:
B6 expanded my world(and brought)personal development.

Another said:
B1 If I wasn't here, if I hadn't done it, I wouldn't be who I am now.

All stated the degree has its own value besides getting a better occupation. One stating it has changed her perspective in a broad sense:
A2 Ithas changed the way that I think about everything.

Learning in smaller groups, than may be the case in an actual university was welcomed, with some stating that they could not have coped in an establishment on a greater scale. Students stated the development of confidence, patience and understanding, as well as the realisation that progression in the sector is a real option. Students refer to improved self-confidence and resilience, and there was a feeling of achieving something for 'myself'. The stage of life timing was welcomed by some who stated that they could not have coped at an earlier age. However, opportunities for single parents were still regarded as limited due to childcare responsibilities. But, even so, the feeling of personal achievement came through strongly with one stating:
A2 you've done it for you and nothing else.

5. Findings summary
Students embark on Early Childhood Studies HE programmes on the Isle of Wight for various reasons: these can be practical and developmental. There is a 'market' for HE programmes in early childhood on the Isle of Wight as these opportunities are considered valuable and significant among childhood practitioners for personal, professional and career development. However, this realisation may not manifest itself until students develop confidence begin to understand the opportunities available. In addition, it is felt that the Early Childhood Education Care (ECEC) sector does not appreciate early years graduates, who are often offered positions for which holding a degree is not necessary. The realisation of the opportunities available, tends to steer childhood studies graduates away from ECEC workforce into graduate professions associated with, but preceived by many at higher professional levels, than EY practitioners. Also, the personal development offered to these undergraduates should not be underestimated as this is crucial to the self-concept and self-efficacy of the students.

6. Discussion
The purpose of this research was to explore the perspectives of graduates and three main themes emerged from the narratives of the participants. An overriding topic emerged from the data, that is what motivates the students before, during and after higher education. Motivation theories will be discussed to form an understanding of the perspectives of this student group to find out what direction they are headed and what behaviour persists (Franken, 1994), and where they place their effort (Jones and George, 2005).

6.1 Logistical and financial
One of the main issues for the students on the IOW is travel to the 'UK Mainland' to study. Costs and existing responsibilities were given as factors for not travelling to an actual university; these responsibilities include work and family commitments. Also, one student stated a lack of confidence to

leave the IOW for a mainland university, implying a sense of imposter syndrome (Langford and Clance, 1993). One other option could be to study online to take travelling out of the equation, but this was not attractive to the students. According to eLearning Industry (2022), there are advantages and disadvantages to online learning. Of the advantages, efficiency,accessibility of time and place, and affordability were not enough to convince the participants to undertake online learning, and it did not seem to suit their learning styles. Of the disadvantages (eLearning Industry, 2022), it seems that 'isolation' was the biggest obstacle. The students have a need for the group experience. The sense of 'belonging' (Maslow, 1943) and relatedness (Alderfer, 1972) overrode potential advantages of online learning. These were the main reasons students chose to stay on the Isle of Wight for their studies.

6.2 Professional

The Early Childhood Studies Degree Network (ECSDN, 2018) introduced Graduate Practitioner Competences as a strategy of improving and raising the professional profile of early years practitioners. This is to use GPCs to become more effective and skilled practitioners. This relates to Pink's (2009) theory of *drive*. Pink states that in the contemporary working world, people are motivated by autonomy, mastery and purpose. There was little evidence that the participants sought autonomy, to become self-directed and increase engagement in their work. If they sought this at all, it was to become autonomous by leaving their EY settings to pursue other options in the sector, and perhaps increase engagement through this route. In terms of a sense of purpose, the participants all had a desire to educate and care for children before, during and after HE so this did not seem to be a motivator to engage in HE in the first instance. Alderfer's ERG theory (1972) fits the motivations of the participants better. The participants were seeking to improve their economic situation, i.e., moving out of a notoriously low paid sector (DfE, 2021). This satisfies the existence aspect of ERG theory. They were also attracted to the relatedness facet of ERG theory, by choosing to study in a group (and isolated online). Above all, they sought *growth*. For the sample, moving out from EY settings and on to more challenging or rewarding roles seemed to be key to explain their perspectives of HE. It may be that they did not formulate these views until they had started (or finished) the HE programme, but HE has opened opportunities for them to realise they seek growth in their roles as early years practitioners. This represents a paradigm shift for them in a professional sense. They have come to realise that other, more challenging and rewarding opportunities are available at this time in their careers, and this has guided their perspectives on HE. So, in terms of becoming better practitioners at what they already do, they have not chosen to do this. Rather, they have realised their potential and have voted with their feet.

6.3 Personal

It has been argued that the participants have experienced a realisation that they can move on from early years settings to more challenging and rewarding roles. However, this is not simply a professional matter. Many of the sample related to personal change and growth due to the experiences of HE, and this should not be underestimated as a factor in their perspectives of HE. Maslow (1943) writes about deficiency needs which motivate people when these needs are unmet. Esteem needs are included in this category and as the participants gain esteem through the experience of HE, the search for esteem has diminished. Instead, they seek growth needs, and these include cognitive needs and self-actualisation. The experience of HE has satisfied some of the deficiency needs and encouraged them to develop. This does not manifest itself in becoming better practitioners at what they already do, it has inspired them to develop their careers in other, but related ways. This is also reflected through Alderfer's (1976) concept of achievement; the participants' experience of HE has diminished their sense of 'risk' to further their careers.

7. Conclusions

This research has shed light on the motivations and professional and personal development of a group of students. It has shown that, rather than developing their careers in their current practice, these group of EY practitioners see opportunities emerge and develop self confidence to move into other areas, although connected with ECEC, are more challenging to suit their altered perspectives. This research has shown paradigm shift in two ways:

1. It illuminates a shift in the way that participants think about their work (i.e., leaving current early years practice for better opportunities).
2. A shift in emphasis of research from looking at motivation to enter HE and GPCs to looking at how they use HE strategically.

A paradigm shift is moving away from an 'accepted model or pattern' (Kuhn, 1962: 23), and the experience of higher education (HE) has provided a catalyst for the participants to do this. The expected process of this research has also changed as the emphasis of the research has changed from examining perspectives of how ECS students view the experience in, HE in terms of their practice, to how it changes them professionally and personally. So, in two ways, basic concepts have been changed. HE has played the role of social circumstances that have precipitated the shift (Handa, 1986) for the students. The cluster of beliefs and practices associated with the worldview (Becker, and Bryman, 2004) of the participants and the researchers have been changed due to the unexpected findings of this research.

The question of the perspectives of ECS HE students on the impact of their practice remains to be answered, as the research has shifted. This research has shown that, once embarked on an HE programmes EY practitioners start to think beyond their current practice. The validity of Graduate Practitioner Competences (GPCs) for this type of student is drawn into question. For ECS graduates at earlier stages in their careers, this may be different, and further research into their views would be helpful to achieve more valid perspectives on the role of GPCs and the effect on practice.

8. Declarations

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