

Active engagement, emotional impact and changes in practice arising from a residential field trip

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This study focused on the learning experiences of 50 undergraduate students undertaking a residential field trip (RFT) to Sweden as part of their Early Childhood Studies degree. Three dimensions were examined: the physical and emotional value afforded to the students from the active learning context; how this was interpreted and reflected in their knowledge, understanding and personal practice once they had left university; and the influence of factors such as age, and professional status on students' practice. The methodology was interpretive, and both deductive and inductive approaches were employed to analyse qualitative, narrative data sets derived from semi-structured questionnaires, interviews and written essays. The findings suggested that the physiological effects of hands on engagement influenced both the students' perceptions of the learning experience and their confidence to become agents of change. Subsequent changes directly attributed to the RFT experience, involved the re-evaluation of both the stereotypical pedagogic role and the way in which they related to children; students re-conceptualised their practices to reflect a more child-centred approach and increased their use of outdoor play and sustainable resources. The RFT was a catalyst that promoted empowerment, and informed both personal and professional transformations.

Keywords: residential field trip; physiology of physicality; transformational empowerment; active learning; Early Childhood Studies; early years professional development

Introduction

This study focused on the learning experiences of 50 undergraduate students undertaking a residential field trip (RFT) to Sweden as part of their Early Childhood Studies degree. Three dimensions were examined: the physical and emotional value afforded to the students by the active learning context; how this was interpreted and reflected in their knowledge, understanding and personal practice once they had left university; and the influence of 'brute factors' (Billet 2009) such as age, and professional status on students' practice. The findings suggest that the inclusion of RFT in early years training provides an effective mode of learning, and should be considered despite the current financial constraints on university programmes. This article seeks to assess the specific opportunities provided in the promotion of human capital at personal, professional and societal level. Students can become 'prisoners of

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their own often limited experiences or the victims of experience of others' (Mumford 2006, 69) if those that design learning programmes do not fully understand what each experience offers to group and individual learning.

Students who personally, physically and actively engage in their learning environment achieve higher conceptual understanding (Pundak et al. 2009), greater retention of information (Smith and Cardaciotto 2011) and increased creativity (Gino et al. 2009; Maddox, Adam, and Galinsky 2010). This style of active learning is endorsed by Dodge (2004) who emphasised the need to promote 'informal learning' and 'learning by doing' rather than the formalised and instructive styles of traditional teaching. Shonkoff (2010) suggests that advances in neurobiology have provided physiological evidence of the symbiotic relationship between emotional stimuli and learning. The processes of memory retrieval, assessment and categorisation of stimuli are influenced by emotional response (Brosch, Pourtois, and Sander 2010; Immordino-Yang and Damasio 2007) and are fundamental to behavioural response and knowledge formation. For true learning to take place, there need to be opportunities to challenge and reflect on personal experience, as no amount of easily accessible knowledge can be considered a substitute for life experiences (Ardelt 2004; Billet 2009; Hope 2009; Rimanoczy and Brown 2008; Silan and Uhlin 2008). Mezirow (1991) recognised that experiences are interpreted through, and subsequently influence, an individual's meaning schemes and perspectives. It is meaning schemes and perspectives that inform personal paradigms 'that serve as a (usually tacit) belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience' (Mezirow 1991, 11). Brute factors, such as age, personal dispositions, experience and cultural contexts (Billet 2009) influence the quality and quantity of knowledge formation. The RFT, once the preserve of anthropology and geographical sciences, is now recognised as a powerful mode of learning as it provides opportunities for active and personalised participation focusing on formal and informal observation of specific phenomena (Fuller et al. 2006; Morgan 2010). These ideas are discussed further in the light of our findings.

The provision in England of consistent and high-quality environments for all children in the early years setting is based upon the premise of practitioners having a common, shared knowledge, understanding and appreciation of 'how to utilise other pedagogues' skills and abilities for the benefit of the team, children and families' (Moyles, Adams, and Musgrove 2002, 56). *The Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning* (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002) and *Key Elements of Effective Practice Study* (Department for Education and Skills [DfES] 2005) recommended that the early years service must be led and delivered by committed, knowledgeable, enthusiastic, reflective and lifelong-learning practitioners. Early Childhood Studies is now internationally recognised as a specific and significant domain for study at higher education level (Baldock, Fitzgerald, and Kay 2009; Rixon 2008).

As early years provision has evolved, the competing purposes to provide biological and social remediation, parental-substitute care and skill preparation for formal education has led to an ambiguity in the direction and content of practitioner training (Soler and Miller 2003; Woodrow and Bush 2008). With no global consensus on what constitutes excellence, providers and practitioners have felt confused and isolated in taking the practice agenda forward (Nolan, Raban, and Waniganayake 2005; Sheridan 2007). Tickell (2011, 2 and 60) recently reviewed the Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Children, Schools and families [DCSF] 2008) and noted that 'good quality early years provision *also* has a large

impact on children's longer term outcomes' and there was a need for the 'Government [to] review the contents of early years training courses to test the strength and quality of these qualifications'. Higher Education programmes must meet the changing needs of students and ensure that those working with children are equipped with transferable knowledge and skills to lead the early years sector workforce (Noble 2007; DfES 2012). There is, therefore, a window of opportunity for higher education institutions to re-examine course content and its delivery to ensure sustainable provision of stimulating, reflective, active learning opportunities which guide students 'to be, to do, to learn and live together' (Matsuura 2000 cited in Hughes 2009, 140).

Experience

For the last five years, final year undergraduates on the BA Early Childhood Studies course at Gloucestershire University have had the opportunity to attend a one week RFT to early years settings in Sweden. The student group included younger traditional route undergraduates as well as more mature students who were also practising in early years settings. Many of the students were undertaking the degree part-time whilst also working in early years settings and, therefore, were in a particularly powerful position to translate into practice any insights gained from their field trip. Those students who were not employed at the time of the trip have since gone into work and have also had the opportunity to implement some of the ideas they encountered.

Sweden is considered to provide a model of good practice in early years' education and care (Moss and Petrie 2002; Pugh 2009). It has well established universal access to early years care provision rather than prioritised service delivery to the most disadvantaged, as seen by the UK Sure Start programme, and it is in the top three countries in the world for child well-being (Hertzman et al. 2010). Varma (2009) believes that well-being should be the primary measure of a nation's development rather than growth of national income. There is a growing consensus that it is through education that the promotion, development and maintenance of sustainable human, social and environmental capital can be achieved (Fien and Maclaren 2009; Hughes 2009; Psacharopoulos and Arriagada 1989; Varma 2009).

Sweden is offered as an alternative perspective to challenge and develop the students' existing knowledge and understanding of pedagogy and practice. Comparative education is traditionally recognised as a multidisciplinary field whose epistemology reflects the creativity, complexity and diversity of the scholars and their subject matter (Crossley and Watson 2009). Although the experience of studying the unfamiliar can assist in challenging the hegemony of the familiar and can lead to the generation of significant new understanding, the temporal and symbiotic influence of particular environmental, social, cultural and environmental factors need to be taken into account. There needs to be an awareness that overemphasising difference and ignoring commonalities (Morgan 2010) is as limiting to the learning experience as adopting a too simplistic 'efficacy paradigm that does not take extraneous variables properly into account' (Stangvik 2010, 350). Little (2010) advocates that cheaper international travel and the globalisation of information technology, such as the World Wide Web, has provided even greater opportunities to understand how educational diversity and well-being both affect, and are affected by local, national and international influences. She argues for comparative research:

to expand and deepen our knowledge about education practices, policies and philosophies worldwide; ... to imagine how education and learning could be arranged for future generations ... how education and learning can be used to increase well-being across all social groups and to reduce disparities between them. (Little 2010, 850)

Methodology

Students were identified from Gloucestershire University records and traced through contact details maintained by university tutors and through professional networks. The term 'student/practitioner' was used to refer to the research participants to signify their combined status as students and practitioners currently working in early years settings.

The methodology was interpretive, and both deductive and inductive approaches were employed to analyse qualitative, narrative data sets derived from semi-structured questionnaires, interviews and written essays. Information from the student demographic data provided the opportunity to explore the relationship between age, professional status and student/practitioner RFT experience.

The first data set was drawn from 50 student/practitioners, with an age range of 20–40 years, some of whom were novice, and others seasoned, early years practitioners. They were sent a semi-structured questionnaire: 40 (80%) responded. Purposive sampling was then employed to conduct 15 (37%), semi-structured follow-up telephone interviews. These provided the second data set which augmented the questionnaire data by expanding upon the original questions and providing verification of changes in practice. Opportunities were also provided for the student/practitioner to engage in 'reflective discourse' (Mezirow 2000), during and after the RFT; narrative field notes captured this data. Following their RFT, as part of the module assessment, student/practitioners wrote essays that included reflective material about changes made in their practice. These two additional sources of data created a third data set that was reviewed for corroborative evidence and internal validation (Nias 1993).

Procedural data reduction techniques were adopted in the initial analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994) and a constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1988) was used to identify themes and frequency patterns of discursive action in the scripts. Discourse analysis of all texts scrutinised the student/practitioners' language selection and the personal significance awarded to recalled incidents. This focused on identifying individual and collective function, construction and variation of events (Potter and Wetherell 1987) and identified three areas of interest: how the students negotiated the meaning of their behaviours; how their interpretation influenced personal and professional perceptions and practice; and how they created and recreated meaning. Once the main themes had been identified from the inductive analysis, the evidence was interrogated deductively using various theoretical frameworks which are outlined in the next section. Because the focus, design and execution of the study so closely reflected the lived experience it was trying to explain, the research findings could arguably be considered more credible and dependable (Denscombe 2010; Lincoln and Guba 1990). Issues of replication and reliability were addressed through investigator (Silverman 2001) and methodological triangulation (Denzin 1970); however, the use of differing methodological strategies also acknowledged the integral links between different aspects of sociological perspectives. This 'bridging approach' (Miller and Fox 2004, 35) added further confirmation of the study's findings. As language analysis and categorisation of

function relies on a tacit understanding of the context and common linguistic history, researcher reflexivity (May 2011) cannot be excluded and was acknowledged as integral to both the collection and interpretation of data.

Findings and discussion

The data analysis revealed the catalytic value afforded by the student/practitioner to the physicality and emotional engagement within the active learning experience. It identified how they recognised their capacity to implement improvements and become ‘agents of change’ (Fullan 1993). This ‘transformative mindset’ (Rose et al. 2011, 56) gave rise to reflection and raised awareness of the factors that currently constrained their practice. Factors, such as professional seniority or age, were identified as limiting changes to their actual practice; however, the majority identified – as a result of the RFT – a sense of empowerment that could transcend their current situation. The active learning experience led the student/practitioners to first re-evaluate the traditional pedagogic role and the way they related to children, and then to consider how their RFT experience led them to re-conceive their practice as more child-centred in terms of addressing the needs of the children rather than traditional agendas. It was interesting to note that there were no substantial differences between the accounts of the initial cohorts and the most recent cohorts who have undertaken the trip: the time lapse does not appear to have had any effect on the participants’ memories of the RFT.

Three main themes emerged from the data and have been illustrated using extracts from the student/practitioners’ multiple texts. The main themes were:

- (1) ***The way students negotiated the meaning of their response/behaviours.*** This was explored through focussing on references to the physicality and the emotional categorisation (Brosch, Pourtois, and Sander 2010) of the learning experience, and reference to the physiology of the physicality (physiological effects of hands-on experience).
- (2) ***The way their interpretation influenced personal and professional perceptions and practice.*** This included an exploration of the transformative effect upon personal and professional meaning schemes and perspectives (Mezirow 1991).
- (3) ***The way meaning was created and recreated.*** This identified changes in knowledge and understanding of early years and professional practice once student/practitioners had left university. The influences of brute factors (Billet 2009) and professional status upon changes in practice were explored to identify additional influences upon student/practitioner learning.

1. How the students negotiated meaning of their response/behaviours

The data support the powerful learning potential offered by direct physical experience that has been noted by other research (Gino et al. 2009; Hope 2009; Smith and Cardaciotto 2011). However, the student/practitioners’ emphasis on the significance given to sensory stimuli and emotional engagement is interesting and warrants further exploration. For example, one student, Carol noted that the RFT was a:

learning experience which I could not have appreciated through literature and secondary sources. I could 'feel' the differences in attitude-within the settings and through the community and its residents that we made conversation with.

Another student, Jenny stated:

I learn by seeing and doing rather than just reading. It has a greater impact upon me and my memory. You can just read about it or you can get involved in the learning- it's first hand experience rather than second or third.

Taylor and Lamoreaux (2008, 53) suggest that without 'physical responses, there is no basis for constructing meaning as it is sensory data that is turned into experience to inform meaning-making'. Thus it is through emotional processes arising from physical responses that individuals assess the value of any stimulus for survival and well-being. Emotional stimuli have the ability to influence our perception preference by speeding up orientation and by prolonging disengagement of attention. An individual's emotional response controls the value afforded to a new stimulus and directs the mind towards the appropriate stored knowledge relevant to a current situation or problem (Brosch, Pourtois, and Sander 2010; Immordino-Yang and Damasio 2007). Emotional categorisation (Brosch, Pourtois, and Sander 2010) is an important influence in the construction of knowledge, yet emotional categories are not pre-determined and are continually adjusted to reflect the current sensory experience as well as incorporating memory-based conceptual information. Therefore, recognition and validation of personal experience, as part of the whole RFT experience, is integral to the creation of a more effective learning environment. As Ardelt (2004, 260) notes:

If the truth is only understood intellectually, it remains intellectual (theoretical) knowledge and does not lead to a personality transformation of the individual. Wisdom needs to be realized through a reflection on personal experiences that transforms the individual in the process.

The powerful emotional responses resulting from the physical stimuli experienced as part of the RFT led to an increased engagement by the student/practitioners and a sense of personal empowerment and ownership of the learning experience. It is through this mechanism that the student/practitioners gained a confidence and impetus to re-evaluate their own views and approaches to practice. This can be seen in Laura's summary:

Because the experience was first hand it has helped keep it in my mind and is more realistic- if I go to a book I think 'oh ye' but seeing it and talking to them really makes me think 'wow' they do it and it works.

Shonkoff (2010) notes that neurobiology offers physiological explanations of the human condition that can be utilised to promote ever more effective use of educational opportunities. In recognising that emotional stimuli, and their association with certain neurotransmitters, have some control in the receptivity to learning environments reaffirms the fundamental function of the emotional contribution to subsequent behavioural responses and knowledge formation. Neurobiological systems that support physiological emotional functioning also guide cognitive

reasoning through reference to appropriate memories that are deemed relevant to the current situation (Immordino-Yang and Damasio 2007). One student, Gill believed that:

the memories I have of their practice, whilst they may not be utilized in my current practice, will be recalled in years to come in my own setting- whereas literature tends to be forgotten more easily.

And another, Linda claimed that the ‘advantages were having experiences that are embedded in my memory and real. These have shaped my practice today’.

Mirror neurones have been identified as playing an integral role in mood, emotions and empathy (Decety and Meyer 2008): these may also provide a physiological explanation for the value of promoting and maintaining effective, educational role-models. The value of such role modelling is recognised by Charlene:

Just reading about things is not enough. The first-hand experience means I can believe in it as the proof is there- in front of you and there is also other evidence around to support it and make it real.

Although ageing may reduce and slow the brain’s capacity to adapt to changing environments and experiences, its ‘plasticity’ – the ability to adapt either through the proliferation, reinforcement or pruning of neuronal networks – continues throughout life (Geake 2009; Mahncke et al. 2006). Therefore, an educational approach that can utilise spontaneous and informal learning experiences, as well as planned and formal multi-disciplinary, multi-level educational opportunities, will offer increased opportunity to exploit the interconnectedness of physical living and lifelong learning at a neural level and will better reflect the students’ lived experience (Cacioppo and Bernston 1992; Guimaraes 2007; Lebel and Beaulieu 2011; May 2011). Laura clearly believes this; she summarises her experience as follows:

It was a positive experience for everyone and I think everyone brought back something from the trip- maybe different things but everyone brought something back.

The RFT provided effective learning opportunities for each student/practitioner through multi-sensory, holistic experiences that fully utilised the physiology of physicality.

2. How student/practitioner interpretation influenced personal and professional perceptions and practice

Adult learning can be seen as a dynamic and complex ‘multi-dimensional phenomenon, not just a cognitive activity’ (Merriam 2008, 94). It aims to identify methods that can equip adults to engage more effectively through self-actualisation (Jones and Hendry 1994). Understanding that learning occurs through life experiences by referencing the world through past and current roles, reinforces the notion that ‘we do not see things as they are, we see them as we are’ (Taylor 2006, cited in Kasworm 2008, 33). Recognising ‘the body as a site of learning’ and learning as something that occurs ‘in social contexts and bodies, not just in minds’ Freiler (2008, 44–45) acknowledges that personal affect influences motivation and

gives meaning to knowledge formation. One student, Charlene noted that her motivation to consider adapting her practice was informed by the confidence she gained from actually experiencing the alternative practices for herself:

If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I may not have felt as confident to let the children I work with try things out for themselves, but I know it is possible to trust their judgements because I have seen it with my own eyes.

The complexity of knowledge acquisition was examined by Baltes (1987 in Linenberger et al. 2007) who highlighted both a temporal and symbiotic relationship between the cognitive, reflective and affective personality characteristics in learning. Merriam (2008, 95) believes that true learning does not occur separately in the 'mind, body, spirit [or] emotions' but occurs in the 'intersections' between these. Accepting that in meaning-making 'relationships are necessary not contingent, and [are] analytic not synthetic' (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007, 34) leads to a belief that adult learning can be analogised as 'an ever changing mosaic, where old pieces are rearranged and new pieces added' (Merriam 2008, 94).

Knowledge formation is recognised as being highly subjective and a result of the combination of specific situation, context and brute factors such as age, personal dispositions, experience and cultural contexts (Billet 2009). It is only through personal critical reflection that decisions reflect our own values, feelings and meanings rather than those that are assimilated through the provision of childhood or unconscious learning. This focus on the personal in the learning experience returns the emphasis of ownership and control to the individual and is evident in Mezirow's (1991) canonical framework for learning. Mezirow (1991, 5 and 7) suggests that experience is interpreted through, and subsequently alters, personal meaning schemes and perspectives. Meaning schemes are 'specific knowledge, beliefs, value judgements and feelings that constitute interpretation of experience' and meaning perspectives are 'the rules systems that govern perceptions and cognition'. The experience of the RFT seemed to imbue the student/practitioners with a confidence to take ownership of their learning through opportunities to reflect upon their perceptions of effective practice. Both Carol and Charlene believed that the RFT provided experiences which reinforced and reaffirmed their belief in the competency of children to co-construct learning. Carol stated:

I have become more confident in following the child's developmental lead and how this relates to risk.

Charlene further noted:

It definitely made me more confident in my judgement of children's ability to make sound judgements.

The data revealed that over 90% ($n=50$), of the student/practitioners re-examined their existing perspectives and this re-examination enabled them to question, develop and adopt new approaches towards their practice. In effect they have been authorised through transformative empowerment (Rose et al. 2011) to become agents of change. This was clearly expressed by Kate:

I experienced various perspectives on early years practice I wasn't expecting and this made me reflect on the effect on the children's learning and development. This made me think about how it will affect my own practice and to make changes for the better.

The re-evaluations resulted in reinforcing previously held beliefs, or raising awareness of the validity – and universality – of their belief and values. Lizzie claimed:

My experience has confirmed the importance of using the outdoors in early years practice, I learnt a lot about outdoor play and its value, I now feel outdoor play is of paramount importance.

Sophie noted that the experience had acted as a catalyst for adapting both beliefs and practice:

Considering that they are advocates for practice in early years I was reassured that provision in the UK is not far behind.

These personal reflections informed either minor adjustments to accommodate the new experiences or led to a radical rethink –e.g. Sam believed that it had given her the:

Confidence to teach outdoors after witnessing the successfulness of Sweden.

As a result of the alterations to personal meaning schemes and perspectives the fundamentals of the student/practitioners' personal and professional beings were challenged. One student, Karen was personally interested in promoting more creative outdoor play in her setting, but lacked personal and professional confidence. After visiting the Swedish settings she concluded:

It was a bit messy but seeing it made me realise it doesn't have to be grand and magical as theirs was really quite simple. I thought that's achievable, I thought I could do this. It did empower me to do it myself- it has transformed me. I thought it would be far more complex and it isn't.

True learning, or transformative learning, involves 'learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change' (Mezirow 2009, 22).

In the past, transformative learning was conceptualised as a cognitive, rational, staged, linear process, however, subsequent developments have recognised emotion, imagination, intuition, context, spirituality, neurobiology and personal responsibility all as integral to understanding human meaning-making (Dirkx 2008; Merriam 2008; Taylor and Lamoreaux 2008). The RFT provided full immersion in multisensory learning opportunities, which challenged and developed the student/practitioners' meaning schemes and perspectives. The experiences led to the majority becoming more confident in justification and ownership of their personal and professional beliefs. For some it also led to immediate practice change.

3. How meaning was created and recreated

The RFT offers a rich, novel learning experience through encounters with different physical, mental and spiritual stimuli. In life, we are 'forever challenged with new

situations which require an adaptive response, therefore, we need to be continually cognitively creative' (Geake 2009, 95). With the RFT, the necessity to engage in personal and group activities ensures each student has multiple opportunities to immerse themselves intellectually, socially and physically in a different culture. Shared experience both affects, and is affected by, the inter-psychological experience between participants and the intra-psychological attributes of the individual. As Billet (2009) notes, the interpretation of any experience reflects the interplay between personal, social and brute factors.

A large proportion (90%; $n = 50$), of the student/practitioners recognised that the RFT challenged their preconceived ideas and values and empowered them to reflect upon alternative approaches. Subsequent changes in practice, directly attributed to the RFT experience, involved students in a re-evaluation of the traditional pedagogic role and of the way in which they previously related to children which led them to reconceptualise their practices to reflect a more child-centred approach and to increase their use of outdoor play and sustainable resources. For Debbie, the RFT had acted as a catalyst in her personal and professional transformation:

as a result of the trip I am now a forest school teacher so I feel I have more influence over a different way to educate children.

Another student, Kate, identified a number of changes in her practice which led her to become more child-centred and to address the needs of the children more directly:

I have introduced more natural materials into the outdoor area, I am developing a new children's centre and will introduce different kinds of lighting and soft furnishing to create a homely atmosphere. I will provide less play equipment than I would before my visit to Sweden. The visit made me reflect on my own practice and how the different practices might affect children's development.

Kim recognised the need to provide resources to support change to ensure that the opportunity for outdoor play could be realised in her setting:

I purchased outdoor clothing for staff and children so that even if it is not provided by the parents they can still go outdoors.

Although the contribution of the individual and the social in learning is now recognised, the emotional context and effect of the relational duality between the personal and social is less discussed, particularly in relation to brute factors. As Billet (2009, 34) notes:

How maturation and ability (or disability) plays out for individuals and influences the means through which they can engage (i.e. sense, observe, feel, and hear) with the world beyond their skin [and] is central to what they construe and construct (i.e. learn) from their experience.

Not all the student/practitioners who identified a sense of transformative empowerment also evidenced changes in actual professional practice on return to England. This could be misconstrued as the RFT having little transferable effect on progressive change in early years practice. However, on examination of the student/practitioner profiles, it appears that brute and other factors influenced the

students' ability to implement actual practice change. Covert and overt societal and cultural traditions imposed on youth by career hierarchies can restrict an individual's ability to evince changes in practice. This study identified that student/practitioners who were older, in more senior positions or worked independently were most likely to report actual changes in practice attributed to the RFT than those who were younger, in more junior roles or in temporary or part-time work. For example, Laura believed that, as a result of the RFT, her preconceptions about children's ability to assess risk had been challenged and changed and she tried to adjust her practice to reflect the new found confidence and trust in children. However, her youth and junior position in the organisation meant that she lacked the confidence or power to challenge the authority of those in more senior positions. She noted:

As a result of my experience I tried over the summer to get the children out of doors-mind you it was difficult sometimes because the older members of the school reprimanded me for letting a child climb a tree during a water fight- I felt the child was safe but had to comply with the authority or I would lose my job and some of the parents are not well educated about it and can complain.

Rebecca and Gill also recognised that, although they wanted to change the way they practised to reflect their new found beliefs, the temporary nature of their work restricted their ability to translate this into practice. Gill simply stated that:

It is difficult to implement my ideas in my setting as I only attend one morning a week as an additional assistant.

Rebecca commented about changing her practice:

Not at present as I am only volunteering, but it has given me food for thought for when I have my own setting.

Linda, a mature student/practitioner in a relatively junior position justified her lack of change:

Not at the moment as the opportunity to change my practice is limited within my current role.

Although some student/practitioners reported little change in their current practice, this did not seem to detract from the overall belief that the RFT had promoted the development of an empowered mindset. It had given them confidence and belief in themselves as change agents. Laura said:

I am full of ideas but I also know that I am just starting my career and won't be able to change things quickly, but just little changes will make me really proud of myself.

Lizzie noted:

My practice has not changed yet, but hopefully it will in the future.

By ignoring the idea that 'we are organic creatures who are moving through the world by means of our senses' (Mayes 2010, 31) educational practices can

sometimes force students 'to live almost exclusively in a mental world divorced from any other aspect of the student being' (Mayes 2010, 35) leading to students being deprived of unique and idiosyncratic experiences, and may reinforce a passive, disempowered and depersonalised role in learning (Beatty 2010; Smith and Cardaciotto 2011). The power of the RFT lies in the reality that student/practitioners are immersed in an unfamiliar multi-sensory learning environment which provides opportunities for both individual and collective active learning. This holistic approach to learning ensures that the students are fully engaged in their education because it directly challenges them to think in new and creative ways and to reflect on different understandings of roles, rights and responsibilities in relation to children. This is clearly stated by Jane who noted:

I am a very practical person- I struggle with always reading things and then putting them into assignments. However, learning about Sweden's practice in person and reflecting on this with peers has inspired me! For the first time I actually wanted to start to write an assignment! That's never happened before!

The evidence provided by this study supports the findings of Chu and Tsui (2008) that the most effective learning programmes and policies exploit practice wisdom, whilst also recognising the influence of personal, environmental and social factors.

Conclusion

Employers increasingly seek workers with sophisticated transferable skill sets including: cognitive, interpersonal, creative, innovative skills are expected alongside an awareness of, and responsibility for, basic environmental, economic and social sustainability (Park, Majumdar, and Dhameja 2009). In response to the call for a society that is both sustainable and equitable, higher education has a responsibility to justify the contribution it can make to address social problems and promote more engaged citizens.

Our findings suggest that the inclusion of RFT in the training of early years practitioners provides personal and direct experience of the powerful synergy of physical, emotional and cognitive stimuli upon learning. In effect the student/practitioners were 'living to learn and learning to live' and had the opportunity to reflect upon the complex and interactional relationship of society, the child, the practitioner and the learning context. Because student/practitioners were immersed, engaged and most importantly, in control of their learning, they were able to actively reflect on their learning as they experienced it during the RFT. This provided an enhanced learning opportunity for personal and professional behavioural development and change. The RFT can be viewed as a compact social learning vehicle that facilitates a way of being and a way of becoming. The evidence presented here implies that through participation the RFT acts as a catalyst to allow student/practitioners to uncover, reflect, confirm or challenge personal and professional beliefs. The variation in changes to actual practice reported by different individuals in the study reflects cultural restrictions afforded by factors such as age, level of experience and seniority, rather than any variation in personal levels of engagement or commitment. However, further research is needed to augment our findings, which were based on a specific location in Sweden and a small group of early childhood students spanning a wide diversity of age, practice experience and practice

opportunity. Future studies could investigate the learning experience of more homogeneous student groupings and more varied study locations and settings to consider the cultural transferability and contextual specificity of the RFT.

How and what we learn through experience, is in part controlled and mediated by our emotional capacity to engage directly with the physical and social world. This study has affirmed the essential role of sensory stimuli and emotional response in the learning experience. It has identified the catalytic importance of the physicality of the learning experience and the influence of emotion and brute factors in mediating the construction and construal of the learning experience. This was summarised by Karen:

I believe that first hand experience and observation of other practices is so beneficial whatever the context. Also being able to talk to the Swedish staff about their practice gives me a further dimension to the experience.

The mediation of interacting factors, such as youthfulness or level of seniority, influenced the students' capacity to translate newly acquired knowledge and understanding into facilitating practice change in their settings. However, transformational empowerment, the transformative mindset which empowered them to believe they could become change agents was achieved in over 90% of the student/practitioners. This suggests that transformational empowerment may be a prerequisite and complementary state in the realisation of transformational learning. In this case the RFT provided the opportunity to set up the conditions for this transformational empowerment, the unfamiliar setting evoked visceral and emotional responses which prompted greater cognitive engagement and subsequent ownership of knowledge. How this is translated into practice is, in part, controlled by cultural expectations; however, practitioner acquisition of transformational empowerment should not be undervalued. If early years practitioners, as a result of their active engagement in the RFT, have the confidence to view themselves as agents of change, the children and families who attend early years settings may, in turn, be encouraged to become agents of change themselves. This shared commitment to a new way of learning to live and living to learn could improve outcomes for all concerned.

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