

Towards confident pedagogy

Introduction

The release of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2020a) and Development Matters (DfE, 2020b) have produced a mixed response from Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector stakeholders. These debates include concerns that the revisions are moving towards a narrower form of adult-led pedagogy that does not consider the research informed best practice on play, child development and learning (Pascal, Bertram & Rouse, 2017). As a counterpoint the Department for Education (DfE) has suggested the revisions will reduce workload and provide a “a focus on language and vocabulary development, as well as teaching numbers in maths” (DfE, 2020c, n.p.) to support children prepare for the move into Key Stage 1. The challenge with any curriculum framework is how to encompass the breadth of age ranges and ensure equality, diversity, and children’s rights are supported. This is particularly important as the Foundation Stage covers children from birth to the Reception Year including both non-compulsory ECEC provision and compulsory schooling. In this article I consider how Early Childhood Studies degrees can support students to understand the reforms and develop an inclusive pedagogical approach when working with young children.

A graduate workforce

The desire for a graduate workforce was underpinned by research on children’s development and learning (Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Taggart *et al.*, 2015). There was provision to upskill the workforce in the Children Act (2006) and the development of the EYFS (DCFS, 2008) provided a rationale for further qualifications. However there has not been the legislative will to mandate for graduates leading practice and debates on qualifications vs. practice experience have been common (Payler & Locke, 2013). There is still a research informed contemporary focus on graduate progression routes and leadership opportunities as a means to support the diversity of children and families and provide firm foundations for the sector (Bonetti, 2020; Pascal, Bertram & Cole-Albäck, 2020). Graduate status can be achieved by either the work based route of Foundation Degrees which lead to a BA Level 6 Top up or the BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies offered by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their collaborative partners.

What does a graduate offer?

Early Childhood Studies degrees started in 1993 and were designed to provide a coherent way to support students to develop their understanding of early childhood in a holistic way. This included covering disciplines such as care, education, health and well-being of babies and young children which considered the social, historical, pedagogical and policy context in which young children and their families live. In 2007 the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2019) set the benchmarks for degree courses and part of the expectations of a graduate included both subject specific skills and other qualities, such as being able to synthesise and critically analysis literature and make clear and coherent links to professional practice.

The subject specific requirements have a focus on child development, pedagogy and working with young children and their families. This includes a commitment to equality and diversity taking a relational and social justice approach. By developing this knowledge graduates should be able to take a lead in supporting and developing professional practice and also have the skills to be critically analytical of both what they read and how them implement pedagogical approaches in ECEC settings. There is a global drive for graduates leading practice and in some countries graduates are expected to be leading pedagogy (Urban et al. 2012), however this has still not materialised in England (Pascal, Bertram & Cole-Albäck, 2020). There have also been wider debates about degrees offering an element of professional practice and how this helps the transition into the workforce. ECS degree's offer a variety of practice options and assessed practice has been recognised as full and relevant at level 3 by the DfE. The Graduate Practitioner Competencies were developed in 2018 by the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (2019) and demonstrate practice, skills and knowledge at level 6. The Competencies are a holistic engagement with ECEC theory and practice and provide graduates with the skills to support equality and diversity found in ECEC.

Graduates and the EYFS (2021)

So what does this mean for the revisions to the EYFS (DfE, 2020a) and Development Matters (2020b)? It is clear that those who work in the ECEC sector want to ensure that children are offered a knowledge rich education. This has been supported by a raft of research evidence and a focus on both playful learning and a hybrid pedagogy (Pascal, Bertram & Rouse, 2017). The

discussions in the sector, particularly about Development Matters (2020b) have raised concerns about how practitioners interpret the requirements across the breadth of age ranges and settings and the Early Years Coalition is working on an alternative set of sector-led guidance ‘Birth to Five Matters’ (Early Years Coalition, 2020). Skilled practitioners need a holistic understanding of child development and pedagogy to work with both children and their colleagues to develop an inclusive and supportive curriculum. They also need to be critically analytical of how to assess children’s development and learning successfully without overburdening workloads (Grenier, 2020). Part of a HEI’s role is to encourage students to become research informed and skilled in pedagogy and child development. Students can experience dilemmas between the research evidence they learn at University and the expectations of the curriculum and practice when on placements. HEI’s can mentor and guide students to unpick policy and practice requirements so that when they ultimately work in settings they can ensure they are catering for all children (regardless of the intersections of age, gender, race, ability, or social background).

Conclusion

Debate and critical conversations are a healthy part of any democratic society; we cannot expect to always agree but do need to be able engage in a dialogue about different points of view. This may result in contested spaces (Pascal, 2019), but it is important to recognise how these debates can be productive. HEIs are well placed to support ECS graduates to develop the skills and knowledge to unpick policy and its expectations and to ask critical questions to support young children and their families. The links between theory and practice found in degree courses provide a way to make clear connections for students to develop their own pedagogical confidence. These skills are essential when designed a curriculum that puts children first, meeting the needs of the unique child across the age ranges whilst blending the elements of play based and more adult led learning.

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