How Can I Support

Early Childhood Studies Undergraduate Students

To Develop Reflective Dispositions?

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Abstract

This thesis is a practitioner based inquiry into how I can support the development of reflective dispositions within Early Childhood Studies (ECS) undergraduate students. The students involved in this research were all level 4 (first year, new entrants) who started their studies at an English University in September 2009.

The study takes a Social Constructivist approach through pedagogical action research and was informed by a Reflective Methodology. My own beliefs regarding ontology lie in the notion that there is no one truth; that is multifaceted and that truths are *'socially constructed multiple realities'* (Patton, 2002, p. 134). This is what Denzin and Lincoln (2008, p. 32) refer to as '*relativist ontology'.* It used qualitative methods to explore my own experiences and the experiences of students in establishing an understanding of expectations to use reflective practice to inform their developing professionalism. My own reflective journey has been a central part of this project and has enabled me to identify how my practice can be improved to enhance the development of a reflective culture within the Centre for Early Childhood in my institution.

Reflective lenses of self, colleagues, students and literature have been used to create an understanding of the existing landscape of reflective practice within this particular context. Focus Group Discussion Forums (FGDF); reflective accounts; peer observation and Post-it Note response were all methods used to collect the data. A grounded theory approach to the data analysis was used which was both an inductive and deductive process.

The findings of this research have been both enlightening and confirmatory. The pedagogical cultural differences between most new ECS students' previous educational experiences, and those introduced when they start their programme in HE, entails a shift from a predominantly transmission approach to one of transformative learning. This requires an understanding of the tutor team to create an environment that is conducive to supporting students through this transition that is underpinned by Social Constructivist concepts.

The data highlights that strategies already used within the ECS programme are complementary to this transition; however, it also highlights that tutors' assumptions about students' capabilities to demonstrate reflective practice is sometimes unreasonable.

This research journey and the findings from the data of this project have enabled me to identify some key considerations when supporting the development of reflective dispositions within ECS students and in enabling a 'Reflective Community of Early Childhood Practice'. These considerations include:

- **Transitional needs of students**
- **Becoming professionally self-aware and developing a professional artistry**
- **The significance of practical experience and its relationship to theoretical perspectives**
- **Opportunities for collaboration within a community of practice**

The other significant finding from this inquiry is that of self-discovery and identifying that my own reflective limitations require consideration. My adaptation of Brookfield's (1995) four lens theory, which includes a new 'fifth dimension' that uses a 'peripheral socio-cultural lens' to widen and enrich the critical reflective process, has been created.

Post viva voce examination has prompted an additional section to this thesis (Section 6). This post script is a critically reflective piece from my perspective as a researcher. Applying my own theory of a wider perspective through a Socio Cultural peripheral lens (Figure 7) which has allowed me to explicitly communicate the significance of this project and demonstrate the relationships between the arguments I make and the impact of these within the early childhood sector and within extended fields of professional practice.

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