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The Impact of Alternative Placements in Teacher Education: Perceptions, Knowledge and Learning.

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Background

This research is in response to the changing nature of teaching and learning within our society and educational system. The official support of a more flexible and creative curriculum has been highlighted by the various initiatives and publications that have been projected by the government; more recently, the Government's commissioned and independent review of the curriculum. This drive for a curriculum that is both creative, broader and more able to meet the changing needs of a society; a society that is living in times of 'unprecedented and accelerating change,' calls for Initial Teacher Educators (ITE) to also review its training and experience for trainees, if the teachers of tomorrow are to become the educators of today.

It has, for a number of years, been widely accepted by many educational theorists and subsequently been promoted as such by teacher educators, that learning occurs in a socially constructed environment - its roots being in the works of Vygotsky and social constructivism.

More recently, the government manifesto (2006) of children learning outside the classroom has moved towards the theory of Bakhtin - that learning is not only dependent on social construction but also that culture and community has a great impact on the way that children learn. Hence we have seen a more recent promotion of children learning in a more socially and culturally rich environment - occurring outside of the classroom.

Despite teacher educators promoting this style of learning for children to their trainees, they have been very slow to replicate or model this style of learning with their own adults. However, contemporary theories of learning; alongside developmental psychology and neuro-scientific research suggest that broad experiences in a variety of settings can enhance professional practice.

This together with the need for a broad, creative curriculum reaching beyond the classroom has led to the more recent initiative by the Government and the Teacher Development Agency to promote trainee teachers learning outside the class. This has also seen a push towards the development of partnerships between ITE, schools and the wider community.

The idea of trainee teachers learning in alternative context is still very much in its infancy, with less than a handful of teacher trainer institutes participating in this form of education; thus there is very little research on the impact on either teacher education or children's learning as a result of this.

Research Questions

The broad aim of this research is to measure the impact of such an experience on teacher education and self perception as a professional and ultimately whether this does impact on the quality of education that they deliver to children in schools. In terms of widening partnership participation, part of the study will look at the relationship between alternative settings and ITT providers and whether this has an impact in terms of collaboration, knowledge of education for both children and trainee teachers and education in the wider context.

The study will primarily focus specifically on 30 humanities students out of 120 students overall, who will be placed in archives, museums and libraries. These settings have agreed to be part of the

focused study. There is one lead archivist who will and the university (as ITT provider) who is overseeing and leading the project.

There is a focused two week programme in June for these students where they will undertake a joint research project on WWI in London. Resources and activities will be made in collaboration with setting staff. These will be trialled in schools and an assessment/evaluation made of the impact. The 30 students will also present their learning at an end of project event.

Methods

This will be a case study approach with largely qualitative methods of data collection, therefore being in the interpretative paradigm.

In order to focus the overall study appropriately it will be necessary to gain the trainee teachers perception of their learning and development as it is now and their understanding of learning in an alternative context and how this would help them develop professionally. It would also allow me to begin to explore the complexity that features in the research itself with a hope that a tighter focus would emerge from the data according to the perceptions, understanding etc of the students and this could be used as instrument to direct the project and later research, appropriately. Cohen et al point out that 'theory is emergent and must arise from particular situations'. (2007, p22)

This will be done through self administered questionnaires, with a follow-up of cross section of semi-structured interviews. This will be repeated with the students at the end of the placement. Observations during the alternative placement will be made and in the follow up school experience. Interviews will also be carried out with staff from the focus settings to gain an overview of the experience.

Frame

Research into this area is very limited. What research is available, is in response to the government initiative and tends to be very positive in its findings. So it is difficult to make an analysis on such a small research sample especially when much has been instigated by policy and agenda. However, Purdy & Gibson (2008) in their evaluation of short term alternative placements concluded that they should be a standard and accepted part of all ITE courses.

A study by Pat Clayton in 1995 looking specifically at role concepts of student teachers undertaking a thirteen week community placement combined with teaching practice suggested that community work enhanced teacher performance.

Other comparative studies, such as by Stachowski (1998, 2006) in his cross-cultural field placements, highlights the impact that local community and cultural immersion can have in terms of student's professional learning and development Zeichner (1998) - argues also for the stronger roles of communities in teacher education.

Research findings

It can be seen that whilst research is limited, it is, for whatever reason, favouring community based teaching and learning. It does not however indicate whether teacher perceptions of their learning was taken into account before the experience took place and compared after to see whether it did have an impact on both the teacher as individual and their self perception as a profession. Studies have not yet been taken into the classroom in terms of teacher performance and children's learning. This initial study aims to make that comparison.