A Case for Change: An Evolving Model of Online Placement Assessment for Early Childhood Education Degree Students

This article opens up a discussion on the quality of professional placement for early childhood education students. It recognises the role of mentoring in enhancing students' quality of experience. It challenges the traditional observation assessment method and argues for considering online professional dialogue as an alternative form of student assessment. The study draws from research and evaluation conducted over five years of one higher education institution's experience implementing progressive and innovative change to enhance students' professional practice experience in the early years.

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Introduction

Professional practice (practicum or placement) is critical to the formation of early childhood (EC) student educators, supporting the development of their values, confidence, competence, and professional identity. Yet despite its acknowledged impact, the practice and processes of placement have remained largely unexamined.

This article briefly reports on a participatory action research study undertaken by one higher education institution (HEI) over five years, as a programme of innovative professional practice was implemented. Findings call into question established approaches to professional practice, challenging methods of assessment and making a compelling argument for improved student mentoring.

These proposals begin to unsettle long-established patterns of professional practice, but they are timely given

learning from the Covid-19 pandemic and an increased policy gaze. We argue for an alternative online form of student assessment and for building mentoring capacity in early childhood education (ECE) settings. It is time to start the conversation on the quality of professional placement for EC students in the Irish context.

Our research confirms that the most influential contributor to the quality of experience and student outcome is the quality of mentoring during professional practice. Mentoring is complex, as students need nurturing relationships to address pedagogical fears, appropriate levels of challenge, and coaching to develop an agentive identity (Recchia et al., 2018). The launch of the Workforce Development Plan (Government of Ireland, 2022) begins to acknowledge the importance of mentoring in early childhood, yet a gap exists between the rhetoric and practice.

There have been repeated calls for professional development for mentors working with students (Sewell et al., 2017). Glynn and Ferguson (2021) note a global need for better support for mentors of ECE students on professional practice. Student mentors undoubtedly need to be professionally prepared, yet current supports are woefully inadequate (Darling-Hammond, 2010). These realities reflect the Irish context and have led us to ask, How can we better support student mentoring in early childhood settings?

We began our research (Figure 1) with the belief that supporting mentors would strengthen students' pedagogy and at the same time build capacity in the ECE profession. We focused resources on building mentors' capacity to work with students. A level 9 (master's) module on leading and mentoring was developed and offered as a stand-alone module and a core element of a full master's in education programme – indicating the growing qualification levels in the profession.

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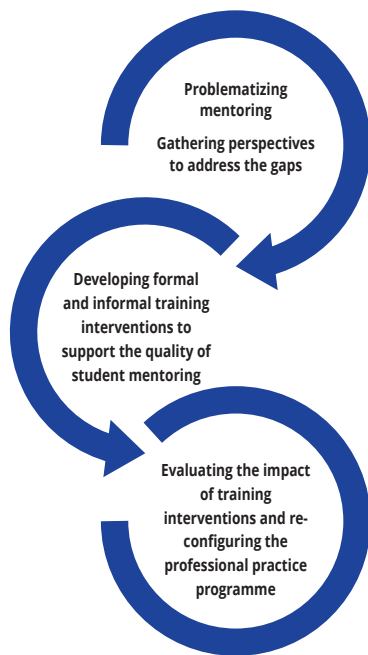

Figure 1: Action research cycles

- Problematizing mentoring
- Gathering perspectives to address the gaps
- Developing formal and informal training interventions to support the quality of student mentoring
- Evaluating the impact of training interventions and re-configuring the professional practice programme

Assessment

Covid-19 presented a challenge to student assessment. The established approach hinges on observing students in practice and subsequent dialogue between the educator mentor (supervisor) and HEI representative (placement tutor). Responsibility for assessment lay firmly with placement tutors. Student mentors felt uncomfortable assessing students, wanting to leave this responsibility with HEIs (Hall et al., 2019). Equally, tensions can arise when the placement tutor straddles the role of mentor and assessor. This approach has been critiqued as being an individualised practice, mainly summative, and lacking collaboration and transparency (Aspden, 2017).

Our values, our research findings, and the pandemic-induced need for innovative approaches enabled us to take a risk and reconfigure professional practice and its assessment (McLaren et al., 2022). We moved assessment online, to 'a third space' (Bhabha, 1994) where the student, mentor, and placement tutor engage in professional conversations. Placement tutors underwent training as preparation. Before meeting online for the assessment, tutors reviewed students' e-portfolios that showcased their work and used this to create probing questions to structure authentic professional conversations.

There is a dearth of literature and research on professional placement in the Irish context.

Placement tutors reported a positive experience of the online assessment, noting the level of students' preparation that facilitated deeper discussion, drawing out students' understanding of theory and practice, compared to traditional observation and discussion (Doyle et al., 2024). Students highlighted the link between increased mentoring support and the move away from classroom observation, which improved the quality of their pedagogical practice and professional placement experience.

Increased supports for mentors improved their skills in working with students and grew their confidence in engaging in professional pedagogical conversations as part of assessment. Placement tutors saw students' work not through a snapshot in time where anxieties may dominate, but through documentation created over time, their reflections, ability to articulate their pedagogy, and capacity to explicitly link theory with practice. In this approach, we argue that creating the conditions for professional dialogues is critical in supporting the development of student educators (Gravett & Ramsaroop, 2015).

Conclusion

HEIs have the potential to act 'as test beds for new ideas, with the ability to lead by example and to share and implement research findings and technology with wider society' (Shawe et al., 2019, p.87). Doyle et al. (2024) write that 'to return to traditional placement experiences alone and ignore the digital "third space"

and changes in assessment would facilitate the loss of opportunities, which emerged during COVID-19 and opened up a new dimension for authentic partnership and communities of practice with practising teachers' (p.17).

Over one-third of all EC degree programmes in Ireland must be allocated to professional placement. Yet there is a dearth of literature and research on professional placement in the Irish context. We need to reconsider traditional structures and conceptualisations of professional practice. It is time to give professional placement due academic attention. We invite others to partner with us in this discussion.

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