

# Experiential Learning through Field Visits in Early Childhood Education and Care

The realm of learning and connection

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This article reports on a research study exploring first-year students' experiences of early childhood education and care (ECEC) field visits. It describes the benefits and challenges encountered, and summarises the findings. These include enhanced student motivation and the importance of preparing students adequately for field visits. The study suggests that such experiential learning could foster student engagement and professional development, enhancing their overall outcomes.

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## Introduction

This article describes research findings from a small-scale study that explored first-year students' experiences of early childhood education and care (ECEC) field visits in a bachelor of arts (BA) (honours) programme at the National College of Ireland (NCI). As lecturers teaching on the programme, we explored the value of field visits and experiential learning in programme development.

Experiential learning through field visits is a learning tool that allows students to apply their classroom-based knowledge in real-life contexts, making learning more practical and meaningful. Research suggests that this approach significantly increases students' retention of knowledge, as they engage in immersive, hands-on experiences (Campbell & Gedat, 2021). It fosters a deeper level of learning and the development of responsible attitudes and positive behaviours in students (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2009).

However, the success of field visits is not guaranteed. It requires careful planning, clear goals, and reflection or debriefing, which are crucial for ensuring that the learning is not just temporary (Behrendt & Franklin, 2014; Foo & Foo, 2022).



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## The research

This mixed-method research engaged 25 first-year ECEC students at NCI in an online survey. Combining qualitative and quantitative data allowed a more holistic approach to understanding the students' experiences. The surveys included open-ended, multiple-choice, and dichotomous questions. The responses were analysed to determine the core themes that emerged.

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Five themes were identified when students were asked about the highlights of their field visits (Figure 1). They highlighted various engaging experiences; most notably, 31% found that interactions with children and staff were the highlight. The students illustrated positive interactions by describing how they played with the children, read stories, sang songs, and spoke with and learned from the educators. Five per cent said they appreciated the opportunity to see what they were learning in college come to life; 28% found that their understanding of theoretical concepts and classroom applications deepened significantly, such as seeing Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework in action; and 18% said their highlight was working with the children.

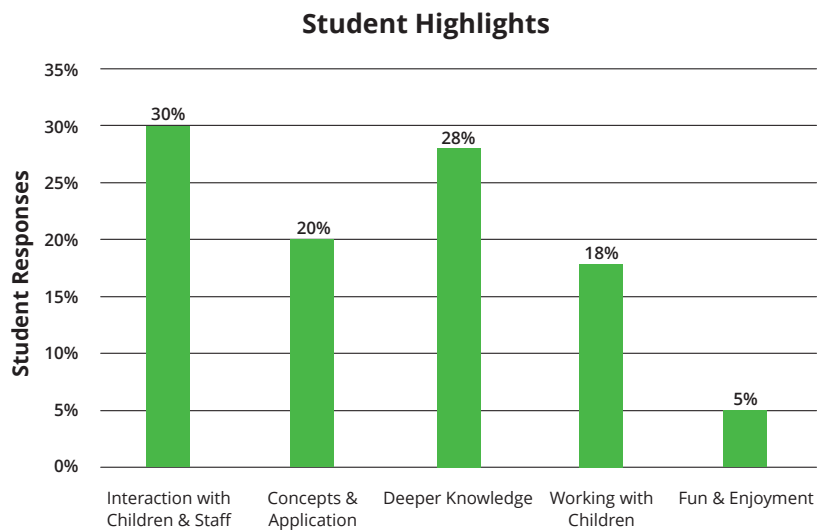


Figure 1: Student highlights

The students were asked if the field visits impacted their motivation to learn: 96% (n = 24) said they had. The most significant finding underpinned by motivation to learn was the impact on students' career path: 33% said the field visits increased their interest in the ECEC degree programme and motivated them to keep learning about babies and young children, so that one day they would become early childhood educators.

Fourteen per cent said their motivation to learn during the field visits enhanced their personal and professional development, 17% felt it fostered a strong desire to learn and showed how educators impact children's lives, and 19% found they improved their understanding of classwork (Figure 2).

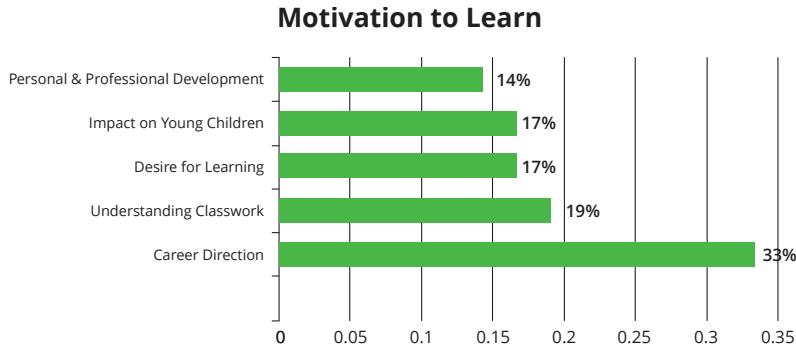


Figure 2: Motivation to learn

The students also encountered challenges. Students on the BA (honours) ECEC programme do not formally attend professional practice placement until second year, so it wasn't surprising that 28% in this study reported that uncertainty with daily routines and practices was a challenge. Twenty-two per cent reported travelling long distances to their field visits and worried about being on time, 22% were shy or overwhelmed by this new experience, and 6% said it was difficult to connect with staff (Figure 3).

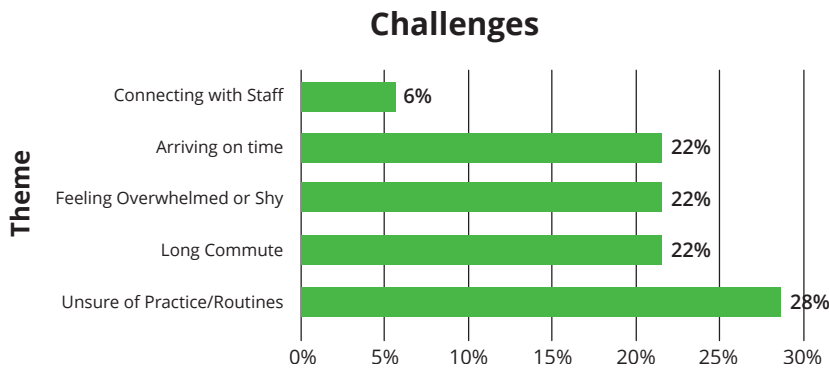


Figure 3: Challenges faced

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## Discussion and implications for practice

Unsurprisingly, our findings highlighted student learning benefits during ECEC field visits, consistent with existing literature. However, as lecturers, we were surprised by the discovery of personal and professional development under the finding of motivation to learn. In their open-ended responses, students used professional language to describe their experiences and could identify professional values in their descriptions and responses. This suggests that students, from the start of the BA programme, absorb information, begin to understand theory and concepts, and effectively convey knowledge quickly. Additionally, students showed increased confidence in discussing their experiences upon returning to class. They could understand and apply knowledge and concepts gained from field visits to other modules throughout the programme.

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We agree with Behrendt and Franklin (2014) that the advantages and potential of field visits to enhance student outcomes don't always guarantee success. Without proper reflection or debriefing, the learning or interest gained may be short-lived. Therefore, it was important for us to allow students time and space to reflect on their experiences.

We have also developed a Field Visit Report as part of an assessment attached to the Foundations of ECEC module to embed learning further and maintain interest. The challenges for students in this study highlighted that it is essential to support their confidence before the field visits so they do not become overwhelmed. We must therefore prepare students adequately during our induction class. To alleviate long commutes and decrease students' anxiety about arriving late, field visits to ECEC settings must be located nearer to NCI.

Nevertheless, it was inspiring to us as lecturers that our study noted many benefits for students' learning and successful outcomes during their field visits, particularly around their motivation to learn. It showed that students chose the correct career path and wanted to graduate as early childhood educators. Higher education institutions should consider the experimental learning approach in the medium of field visits as a successful component of students' learning and development and as an integral part of their programmes.

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## REFERENCES

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