

The power of play: preparing international higher education students for practicum

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With an increased number of international students undertaking higher education courses (degrees), Australian universities are challenged to prepare international students with the necessary understandings, knowledge and skills to effectively participate in the workplace. For many students, understanding Early Childhood Education in Australia is a new way of viewing teaching and learning from their own cultural perspective. In order to facilitate successful engagement during pre-service teacher practicums (placements) and in response to concerns raised by mentor teachers in the workplace, a pilot program was run at Deakin University in 2015 for students to undertake before placement. The program focused on ‘play’ as an innovative model of teaching. This paper situates itself as part of a wider study *Improving work placement for international students, their mentors and other stakeholders*. It draws on narrative reflection, classroom observation, questionnaire and interview data from the early childhood strand within the Master of Teaching course at Deakin University. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis the data was analysed and coded into two emerging themes: building confidence and competency skills and connecting to the early childhood context. Generalisations cannot be made to other educational institutions or context however; the findings reveal that ‘play’ can be used as a powerful tool to empower students to make connection with early childhood settings. It is hoped that the findings may provide a platform for further dialogue with other universities regarding how best we can prepare international education students at Australian universities for their practicum experience.

Keywords: Play as a tool, early childhood teaching, higher education

Introduction

Australian universities are highly regarded overseas in terms of rigor and quality of teaching and research with 94% of international students (IS) choosing a qualification because of reputation, and 93% because of the status of the institute (Australian Government, 2015a). Australian Higher Education institutes have the third highest number of IS after the United States and the United Kingdom (Australian Government, 2015b). Enrolments into Higher Education increased from 8.4% in 2014, to 9.6% in September 2015 with China and India remaining top countries (Australian Government, 2015c). Given the high percentage of IS, universities are challenged to equip them with the necessary skills, knowledge and understandings to enter the workforce successfully. Gribble (2014, p.7) asserts that universities in Australia are challenged to “establish productive links with employers and

create work experience opportunities for an increasingly diverse student” population. IS come from different parts of the globe and face many challenges when undertaking study in a foreign country (Qing, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010; Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell, 2009). IS each have diverse teaching and learning experiences when entering higher education institutions.

IS generally find it difficult to adjust to their new and different living and study milieu. Poyrazli & Grahame (2007) found this relates to the fact that many students come from different countries where they are not proficient in English and have to adjust to life/study. Differences like that of culture and language are challenging for them as they have to adjust to unfamiliar ways of teaching and learning which they may not have experienced in their home country (Andrade, 2006; Crabtree & Sapp, 2004). Often the ways of learning and teaching in Western universities does not align with the diverse cultural backgrounds and the learning needs of IS (Guo & Jamal, 2007; Schuerholz-Lehr, Caws, Van Gyn, & Preece, 2007). Grey (2002) suggests that IS found the curriculum marginalizing and teaching staff take little interest in their prior knowledge. For these students, the notion of internationalisation is about transition from their culture to a new learning environment.

Little research has been undertaken in the area of exploring IS individual needs in relation to their work placement. This paper situates itself within the wider project across six Australian universities *Improving work placement for international students, their mentors and other stakeholders* (2014-16) to address this gap. The wider study aims to improve current procedures, practices and assessments related to work placements for IS courses in the area of education, business and health. This paper focuses on early teacher education within the Master of Teaching (MTeach) Early Childhood (EC) course at Deakin University (Victoria) a leading provider for IS in Victoria (Deakin University 2015). Gribble (2014, p.2), writing within an Australian, context argues “international students require tailored programs and support services in order to create a level playing field with local students”. This paper offers a discussion of ‘play workshops’ as an effective way to engage IS before going on placement. Within the MTeach EC strand, over 90% of the cohort come from parts of Asia.

What does the literature say?

Early childhood education in China has experienced significant curriculum reform since the turn of the century drawing on a number of Western curriculum models such as Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), Reggio Emilia, Montessori and the Project Approach, with strong emphasis on promoting child-centered, child initiated play based teaching and learning (Hui Li, Wang & Wong, 2011; Liu & Feng, 2008). In Taiwan and Hong Kong the DAP is the dominant early childhood practice (Lee & Feng, 2008; Ebbeck, Yim, & Lee, 2013). Despite the curriculum policy advocating a child centered approach, studies have found that practice is still representative of the more traditional teacher directed curriculum of the past (Lee & Tseng, 2008; Hui Li, Wang & Wong, 2011) where children are seen as learning “when they are engaged in drill, practice and rote” (Wong, 2008, p 115). All children are expected to do the same thing at the same time and rarely work independently or in small groups on self-selected tasks (Vaughan, 1993). The DAP in many Asian countries has at its core a philosophy based on individualism, whereas China, Taiwan and Korea are largely influenced by philosophies that encourage collectivism (Zhu & Zhang, 2008; McMullen et al., 2005).

Yang and Yang (2013) found within a Chinese context that teachers took the lead when planning and organising the play experiences for the children, assuming more control and ownership of 'play' than the children. Child-centered, child initiated play-based teaching and learning builds a sense of children seeing themselves as individuals, giving them agency. In these countries, play has been used a reward time for the children to relax after their 'work', with no real learning intentions, rather, academic studies were seen as a priority (Yang & Yang, 2013; Wu & Rao, 2011). Wu and Rao (2011, p. 471) identify in "Chinese culture, play and learning are separated and regarded as two different things, and play is even deemed as opposite to learning". Though the promotion of young children's agency has been identified as a foundation to learning, development and wellbeing outcomes, studies found that while the teachers espoused the value of play, activities were teacher directed and teacher dominated, with teachers providing instruction to the children regarding their play (Cheng, 2001; Cheng & Stimpson, 2004; Yang & Yang, 2013).

Play workshops within the MTeach

In the first semester (eleven weeks) of the course, students undertook practicum (placement) between week six and eight. This involved IS observing, interacting and participating in programs provided to children aged from birth to two years in early childhood education and care centres. The play workshops were designed to support the IS to gain some insight into the context of early childhood education in Australia prior to undertaking their first workplace practicum. The workshops were two hours duration, conducted over the first five weeks and facilitated by the early childhood lecturer (Author 2). In addition, an English language academic also participated in the workshops to support the IS with understanding the colloquial and professional jargon commonly used in early Australian early childhood contexts.

The first hour provided students opportunities to practically engage in a range of open-ended play experiences typically found in classrooms catering for the infant and toddler age groups. Each workshop was introduced with the lecturer modelling story reading, story telling, singing and poetry. The modelling included teaching strategies for transitioning children in and out of play experiences as well as the language used for engaging young children. Following this, students spent time freely exploring and engaging with a range of materials (such as blocks, sand, dolls, dress-ups, books, play dough etc.) to facilitate 'play' by using their imagination in creative ways. During this time the lecturer moved between the experiences, commenting on what she saw happening. By asking open-ended questions and modelling alternative uses for the materials, she questioned students in relation to 'what play was occurring'. The second hour employed video material as a way to help develop skills in observation practice, child development and teacher interactions. This was followed with targeted questions and tasks for the students to engage in, allowing students to share their reflection with others in small group discussions. At the end of each workshop, the details of the activities (stories, words of the songs, poems, finger plays, recipes for play resources such as play dough, finger paint etc.) were written out and uploaded to the Cloud learning site for the IS which they could readily access to use in the centre and include in their practicum portfolio.

Methodology

Having gained ethical clearance to undertake the research, Dawn (Author 1) visited the MTeach (EC) students at the start of the second semester in July 2015 and invited them to

participate in an initial open-ended questionnaire about their placement experience in semester one. Questionnaires are a logical and easy option to collect information (Wisker, 2008). The use of open-ended questions according to Cohen et al. (2000, p. 255) is “a very attractive device for smaller scale research” as it allows for “respondents to express themselves freely, resulting in a greater variety of information” (Kumar, 2011, p.153). At the end of the semester (November 2015) a second questionnaire was circulated via email inviting students to focus specifically on the ‘play workshops’, which they had participated in prior to commencing their placements. This was sent after assessments were all completed and results released. It is the second questionnaire, which is the focus of this paper. The questionnaire was in three parts using a Likert Scale for Section A (on preparing for the practicum) and Section B (on the content and teaching during the workshops). Section C employed open-ended questions focusing on improving the workshops. The open ended questions included: What are some of the things you would like to have known or had an opportunity to experience before you went on placement? What you think will be helpful for new international students to be successful in their placements? What supported you most during the your placements?

The questionnaire data took the form of an idiographic phenomenological qualitative case study (Smith et al., 2009; Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005) that explored the lived experience and perceptions of the participants. We used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyse and code the data. As researchers, we have remained true to the participants’ responses and all data is reported through direct quotations (Larkin et al., 2006; Tzanidaki & Reynolds, 2011). Both authors read and re-read the questionnaire data comparing and discussing emergent themes. For the purpose of this paper two key themes (building confidence and competency skills and connecting to the early childhood context) are discussed.

Findings

In semester one, twenty international students enrolled into the MTeach (EC) course from Mainland China (11), Taiwan (1), Hong Kong (1), Singapore (2), Malaysia (1), India (1), Iran (1), Italy (1) and United Kingdom (1). Only eighteen students continued into semester two and were given the questionnaire. From these, sixteen were from Chinese cultural and linguistic origins and eleven returned the questionnaire through email in November 2015.

Section A: preparing for practicum

By using a Likert Scale (1 = not at all helpful, 2 = a bit helpful, 3 = helpful, 4 = quite helpful, 5 = very helpful), students were asked to indicate what best reflected their thinking and understanding of preparing for practicum. Nine of the eleven students found the play workshops were ‘quite helpful’ or ‘very helpful’ in gaining an understanding of the play experiences that children engage in. Nine also indicated that the play workshops helped them to understand more about play with young children. All but one student found the play workshops were ‘helpful to very helpful’ and prepared them to interact with the children when on placement. Eight out of eleven said the play workshops were ‘quite helpful’ or ‘very helpful’ in assisting them link theory to practice. They found watching the videos of young children and the interaction with the lecturer ‘helpful’ in assisting them to understand the learning and development of young toddlers. Interestingly, the same number indicated that the play workshops were ‘quite helpful’ or ‘very helpful’ in understanding what the educator was doing in the workplace. Though one found that this was ‘not at all helpful’ and found the videos only ‘a bit helpful’. In relation to whether the workshops helped build confidence,

seven said the play workshops were 'quite helpful' or 'very helpful' with none indicating that they were 'not at all helpful'.

Section B: content and teaching during the workshops

Nine students indicated that introducing the workshops with stories, songs and other teaching strategies at the beginning of each session was 'very helpful' and one said 'quite helpful'. All of the other teaching strategies and content across the workshops sessions were seen as beneficial, with responses evenly spread from 'helpful' to 'very helpful'. These strategies included, for example, a range and variety of open-ended play experiences to explore and engage in play with the lecturer interacting with students during the play activities. It is interesting to note that the same student who felt that the videos were only 'a bit helpful' also felt these strategies to be only 'a bit helpful' in helping her to understand more about interacting with children. This student had prior experience in early childhood education. While the feedback provided to the students by the lecturer was seen as useful, six found this to be only 'helpful' with the others indicating that it was 'quite helpful' and 'very helpful'. The other teaching behaviours such as modelling and interacting with the students during the play experiences were mainly seen as being 'helpful' (four responses), and the remaining being either 'quite helpful' or 'very helpful'.

Section C: improving the workshops

The open-ended questions focused on how the lecturer could improve the program to better prepare IS for their workplace practicum. It was evident that most found the inclusion and demonstration of songs and stories to be most beneficial. Student 2 said "modelling of teacher practice by the lecturer" was most helpful. However, Student 1 suggested, "as most of us do not have teaching experiences in Australia, it would be very helpful for us to get some popular stories and songs that children learn...in Australia". Student 8 felt it would have been more helpful to "create a real context for international students who have never been to an early childhood [centre]". As students were not taken to an 'actual' site before their placement and most came from Asian countries, Student 6 strongly felt the need for

international students to have a general picture about how a children's centre and/or a room in the centre would be like before the first placement in the workshops. A general but whole picture, not different pieces of images about activities and how children learn though these are important information as well.

When asked about support, Student 4 commented on her negative experience during her first placement, "I struggled with the non-acceptance by the people of the centre". In contrast to her second placement

a totally different experience because the support came from the local mentor and the centre staff who were so supportive of me and made me feel welcome, which allowed me to completely enjoy the experience and learn a great deal from it, because the positive environment.

Student 11 felt that she was "being used" by her supervisor and felt she did not have the opportunity to gain teaching skills. When asked to reflect on what would help IS in their future placements, Student 6 and Student 9 strongly felt having practical experience and understanding of an Australian early childhood education and care setting was essential. Student 6 aptly said

I had completely no idea how a children's centre in Australia was like. I mean, for example, the daily routine, how they look like indoors and outdoors, how the teachers interact with children and etc. So, I felt nervous before and unconfident during the first placement...

Another aspect that would help international students was gaining a clearer theory-practice nexus. Student 1 believed that "more theoretical understanding of play theories and play models in early childhood is required through lectures and demonstrations". She suggested that it would be useful to have "more input from the lecturers about the play importance and play experiences". Student 7 also felt there was a need for more "emphasis on pedagogies, programming and planning" before going on placement. The role of the university academic during the placement was influential in students feeling confident and competent whilst on the placement. Student 11 found that her "school teacher (academic) was available all the time for my questions and always supportive". Similarly, Student 9 found "it was very helpful that teachers (academic) replied to emails and answered questions however, in emergency situations it was hard when they needed help immediately" and the academic was not readily available.

From the open-ended questions it was evident that students were not all that confident despite the five weeks of play workshops. Student 6 admitted "I lack my own confidence" and Student 3 acknowledged she did not know how to use "teaching strategies and pedagogies to plan for children". In a similar vein, Student 5 self-confessed that she did not have the confidence to know "how to interact with and what approach [she] should take with children during their play". Student 11 felt that IS should be "encouraged to take the initiative be confident and [have] enthusiasm" if they wish to succeed. Student 4 felt that having "a genuine interest of children would help to enjoy the placement". In addition, she felt students need to

be open-minded and go with the flow at the placement. Regardless of your nationality, remember that you are in the Australian education system, and embrace the differences. Also show respect to the staff of the centre and accept all the different types of children, because they are innocent.

Discussion

The IS commenced their MTeach (EC) with no experience of early childhood teaching or the education environment in Australia. Most had not been inside an Australian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECE & C) setting prior to commencing their course. Their own schooling had largely influenced their understanding of teaching and teachers, and as children many did not themselves attend early childhood programs. Two clear emerging themes arose when examining the findings of the questionnaire: Building confidence and competency skills and Connecting to the early childhood context.

Building confidence and competency skills

Without contextual understandings with which to connect, the IS found it difficult to make the connection to ECE & C environments, and to feel confident while on the practicum. The play workshops were conducted in a seminar room typically found in a University classroom, and students were unable to connect this experience with what they encountered when arriving at the practicum settings. While the workshops provided opportunities for IS to gain insights into the pedagogies and practices of Australian ECE & C settings, they did not allow

the IS opportunity to practically apply the teaching strategies they had observed in order to build their own skills. Due to time constraints the IS did not have opportunities to apply the skills and the observed strategies in simulations. This lack of applied learning opportunities appears to have contributed to the low confidence and competence levels the students may have experienced while on the practicum. The workshops were designed to enable students to experience play as learning but appear to be somewhat abstract in nature as the responses indicated that the IS had not been able to connect what they had experienced with what they were engaging in during the practicum. Their lack of experiential understanding meant that they could not draw on past contextual understanding to make the necessary connections, as evidenced by their comments. The IS perceptions were that they entered the practicum with little preparation and knowledge which then impacted on their confidence and feelings of competence.

Though the teaching material was made available at the end of each workshop the IS still felt they lacked the competence and confidence to undertake singing and storytelling with the children on practicum, not connecting the teacher modelling with their own teaching approaches. As the songs taught were unfamiliar and they did not have an opportunity to engage in singing and storytelling in front of their peers, it left little time to develop a tool box of strategies to use when confronting this expectation during the practicum, thus challenging their competence and confidence levels. The lack of practical application again appears to be a contributing factor in the IS not feeling adequately prepared for the practicum as they strongly appealed for more stories and songs to be given as a resource so that they could use it in the Australian context.

Connecting to the early childhood context

Whilst there was this lack of practical understanding and opportunity on campus, what appears to be the most significant factor for the IS students feelings of success during their practicums, was that they felt welcomed, valued and supported by the mentor and fellow educators at their centres. This for them had the greatest impact where they felt they were able to take the opportunity to learn, ask questions and practice their teaching. However, many of the IS participants reported not having these positive experiences and often felt marginalized. This led to them not feeling confident in their role, anxious about asking questions and confused about expectations when on placement. This may have impacted on the IS making connections between the workshop experiences and their practical application if they felt unable to have the necessary professional conversations with the mentor in order to consolidate their teaching and learning experience and understanding.

Conclusion

The play workshops were successful in introducing IS to the practice of 'play'. The IS were able to take notes of the strategies used by the lecturer and gain some understandings of ways to engage with young children. However, the lack of practical opportunities during the workshops impacted on the confidence and feelings of competence. Future approaches to supporting these students need to include opportunities to enact simulated teaching strategies for 'play' in real EC settings. The sterile nature of the university classroom appears to have impacted on the IS ability to connect the workshops to the practicum setting. In hindsight, undertaking these workshops in an existing ECE & C setting might have assisted the IS to make the connection between the abstract and the practical. Some IS reported they felt welcomed, valued and supported by the mentor during the practicum and this appears to be a critical factor in the success of their practicum.

This small-scale study is a limitation in itself; hence, generalisations cannot be made to other educational institutions or context. As tertiary educators we are challenged to prepare our pre-service teachers with the necessary skills, competencies and experiences to do well on their placement and to find work. The findings in this study show that ‘play’ can be used as a powerful tool to empower students to make connections with ECE & C settings. It also revealed the need and necessity to work closely with the lecturer as building strong and trusting relationships is beneficial for student’s retention (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007). Further research needs to be undertaken in relation to embedding and integrating intercultural learning into the culture of the university (Leask, 2013). It is hoped that the findings may provide a platform for further dialogue with other universities regarding how best we can prepare international education students at Australian universities for their practicum experience.

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