

Taking a Collaborative Approach to Our Students' Research in Education Settings

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Abstract

In the United Kingdom (U.K.), all students who are studying for a Bachelor of Arts degree need to complete a piece of independent research in order to gain their “honours” (U.S. “honors”) status. As a university faculty we have very specific ideas about the purpose of this research and the positive impact that we hope that it will have upon the U.K. settings (mainly schools and kindergartens) in which it is carried out, which we discuss in this article. Although our approach would appear successful, this judgement has so far been based upon the evidence of the final, summative project alone. Obtaining a small amount of funding from the university for students to act as co-researchers provided the ideal opportunity to explore the topic further by collecting empirical data from students and settings. Because our original plans for data collection were disrupted by COVID-19, we gained responses through an anonymous survey which enabled frank responses from both students and staff in settings. Although the data collected was, overall, encouraging, it did raise some issues for us, as faculty tutors, to consider. These include the way that we convey the importance of students carrying out their projects *independently* (that is, without university supervisor intervention) to settings themselves, and how we ensure that the students collaborate with settings at *all* stages of the project.

Key Words: dissertation, student research, practitioner research, collaboration, ethics, care, university placements, practicum, United Kingdom, schools

Introduction

In the U.K., a university degree with honors signifies a higher standard of degree than a standard Bachelor degree, and all students who wish to have “hons” added to their Bachelor of Arts (BA) title must successfully complete an independent research study or dissertation in their final year. This means that each year we, as tutors in the Department for Children and Families (DCF, a faculty within the School of Education in a university in central England where we train students who are preparing for a future in kindergarten or early years teaching), support over 100 students in our BA program to carry out research in settings where they will impact upon children, families, and fellow practitioners. In fact, it is highly unlikely that any child in our local district will go through their schooling experience untouched by one of our university students’ research projects. This is a responsibility that we take seriously as a department and has involved us reframing the approach traditionally taken to these projects by our students to better suit them and the settings in which research takes place.

Central to this shift in understanding is our students recognizing, whether already employed by the setting or only visiting on placement, that they are *not* experts carrying out research with the aim of developing the work of others, but novices, researching in order to develop self. They are researching with the aim of producing a dissertation that demonstrates “that [they] have learned how to do research” (Phillips & Pugh, 2015, p. 29). It is likely, as novice researchers, that they will make a few mistakes along the way, but as their university tutors it is vitally important to us that these students’ interactions in setting are positive—that our students are supporting and not hindering those with whom they are working.

We make clear to our students, who are both practitioners and researchers *in training*, that they are not positioned to cast judgement on the practice of others or to make lists of recommendations for colleagues in settings. Many of these professionals, after all, are far more experienced practitioners than themselves. Instead, we have adopted McNiff’s (2010, 2014, 2016) approach to action research, whereby the focus of student research studies is one of *self-improvement*. This does not then preclude the possibility of the research having a positive impact upon the settings, as by sharing their findings with those in the settings they then “stand some hope of influencing the thinking of someone somewhere” (McNiff, 2010, p. 132). The emphasis is a *collaborative* approach to research between the student and settings’ staff, whereby there is potential for all (but always, ultimately, the child) to benefit from the learning experience.

The points above and the ethical values underpinning our faculty's approach have been discussed in a range of previous publications (Solvason, 2016, 2017, 2018). The problem with these publications is that they have all been theoretically or anecdotally based, as we have not had empirical data to determine the impact of this specific approach on either researcher or research setting. Although we have seen "evidence" through submitted dissertations (which, it is important to remember, is an assessed piece of work counting towards a final degree classification), we have not, until now, had opportunity to collate the frank perspectives of both students and settings' staff about their experience of this collaborative research. Our university's "Students as Partners" research scheme, which funds students to play an active role in a research project, provided an ideal opportunity for us to fill this void.

This research project, designed in partnership with two students who had opted into the project (and are named as authors), aimed to:

- develop a clearer picture of the experiences of our students carrying out settings-based research, and
- establish evidence of impact (if any) that students' research has had upon settings from the perspective of setting staff.

We hoped to create the conditions to optimize honest responses from all participants. This would help us to better understand which aspects of our approach were working well and enabling positive collaborations between students and settings, and which needed further development. Our findings will provide food for thought for anyone in a setting that supports students carrying out research, in addition to prompting university and college tutors to reflect upon how they guide students in their research projects.

Literature Review and Contextualisation

Unlike many literature reviews, ours serves a dual purpose—to explore literature related to the student dissertation, but also to further establish how, in some cases, our own approaches are *different* to these. Thus, while discussing the existing literature, we further contextualize our own approaches to student research to make clearer the context for the research results that follow. We note here that the existing literature all focuses upon guiding students in their research approaches; it does not consider how their research might impact upon the setting.

The Purpose of the Dissertation

Before specifically moving on to the type of practice-based research carried out by our students, it is useful to understand the role that the dissertation

plays within the broader student experience. Final-year undergraduate dissertations are a common feature of university courses around the world, including within the discipline of Education Studies (Gibson & Garside, 2017). Usually, undergraduate dissertations involve the collection of empirical data (Gibson & Garside, 2017) and are concerned with the generation of new knowledge (Jacobs, 2017; McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Van der Meulen, 2011), albeit on a modest scale.

There is a considerable body of literature available to undergraduates as guidance to completing a dissertation, and these texts primarily emphasize the procedural aspects of conducting research. For example, Bell and Waters (2017), define the purpose of research as “the attempt to provide answers to questions by collecting and analyzing data and information” (p. 12), and Dencombe (2017) explains research as encapsulating “identifying, measuring, solving a problem, evaluating, and producing guidelines” (p. 5). Texts such as these are designed as useful guides to undergraduates across a wide range of courses; however, our faculty’s approach to dissertations embeds some key differences to much of the published work.

Crucial to our approach to research as a department is that ethicality is embedded *throughout* the process, rather than confined to discrete procedural considerations prior to the research beginning. This approach is reflected in the emphases on self-improvement and collaboration, as alluded to earlier, and is firmly entwined with the caring nature of the professions that our students are training for. Many of our graduates will go on to work with children and families, and in recent decades there has been a resurgence in the need for relationship-based practice to be recognized as central to this type of work (Munro, 2011; Trevithick, 2014). Therefore, in our department, *how students conduct their research in relation to others* is key.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2019) recognizes that Education Studies has “its own academic community, its own distinctive discourse and methods of enquiry” (p. 4). The education of children carries with it a moral responsibility beyond that found in many other professions (James et al., 2005), and despite the industrialization of educational systems in the U.K. threatening to squeeze the humanity out of it, Jarvis (1995) advises educators to “be prepared to respond to the current social pressures and retain the ethic of concern for persons that forms the very essence of education itself” (p. 25). This duty of care is magnified when working with the youngest and most vulnerable and their families, where Dadds (2002) suggests the work is a moral endeavor. It is only reasonable, then, that we should view our dissertations in a different light than those carried out in many other subject areas.

The Practice-Based Research Dissertation

As Sanderson (2016) explains, schools and universities are inextricably linked; they “need each other to reach their common and respective goals” (p. 184). Practice-based research projects afford opportunities to work with others in settings, which can be more rewarding for students than working in isolation (Van der Meulen, 2011), but can also present inevitable challenges. On our faculty’s BA course, some students will carry out research in settings which are new to them, others will revisit a setting where they have had a previous placement, and some will carry out research in a setting that already employs them. Each circumstance holds unique challenges in terms of the insider/outsider dynamic, possible conflicts of interest, and the negotiation and mutual understanding of the roles of researcher, university student, and practice colleagues. However, as Sanderson (2016) noted, there is often a disconnect between the intentions of the university and the settings’ understanding of these. Researching as a visitor can be viewed as presumptive, and researching one’s own organization is intrinsically political (Coghlan, 2019); if roles are not tacitly or explicitly understood by all involved, research can be regarded as threatening the status quo or even as subversive.

Costley et al. (2010) point out that where researchers are insiders, they need to draw upon the shared understanding and trust established with colleagues. We would go further and argue that it is the responsibility of *all* practice-based researchers, colleagues or otherwise, to strive to achieve this ethical imperative within their research. This accountability necessitates the foregrounding of the researcher’s *self*-development so that there is a praxis of critical self-reflection in the management of dynamic relationships with others, which can counter-balance the more traditional researcher identity as critic, aiming to bring about change for those people and processes external to them (Coghlan, 2019).

Unlike some educational training courses, reflective practice is recognized as core to effective early childhood education and care (QAA, 2019). Since power imbalances in the research process are inescapable, it is important that student researchers reflect upon their “power and privilege as researchers” (Van de Meulen, 2011, p. 1295). Employing highly sensitive and respectful ethical research approaches underpinned by reflection can support both self-development and reciprocity as well as “democratic knowledge development in practice” (Jacobs, 2017, p. 578). Indeed, beyond the fairness of democracy, we make clear to our students that the needs of the other must always take priority in their research settings. Solvason (2017) stresses that, “as practitioners in a caring profession, we have a responsibility to provide for the basic needs of research participants, above and beyond our need to obtain ‘valid’ research results” (p. 169). Put more simply, the need for good research results should never eclipse our moral duty of care to those with whom we work in the education settings.

The Ethical Imperative

Ethical codes exist to minimize risk of negative impact, either unforeseen or deliberate, as a consequence of research. No matter how small, any research conducted in British universities must comply with the ethical code of its institution. As well as our university ethics policy governing the research carried out by all students, students in our course are also directed to the ethical code specific to research in education—the British Education Research Association’s *Ethical Guidelines* (BERA, 2018). There are, additionally, ethical codes particular to the Early Years profession. However, Banks (2009) argues that the problem with such codes is that they are externally generated, that is, they are produced *for*, not *by* the researcher, and as such require no more than compliance. In our department we believe that a vital aspect of successful research is that ethics becomes meaningful to the researchers as they become aware of their responsibility to the “other” in the research.

When discussing the ethical guidance that researchers receive, Banks (2009) suggests that the examples of challenging scenarios found in textbooks can make it seem as though “ethical issues only arise when a problematic case or difficult dilemma is experienced” (p. 3). In this context, ethical consents become nothing more than a “safety net” for when troubles arise. This clouds the reality that all aspects of research, just like all human interactions, are ethically loaded. Punch (1994) discusses how deeply personal research is and that “Entry and departure, distrust and confidence, elation and despondency, commitment and betrayal, friendship and abandonment—are all as fundamental here as dry discussions on the techniques of observation, taking field notes, analyzing the data, and writing the report” (p. 84).

Choosing who it is appropriate to ask, what those questions might be, and how participants can genuinely opt in or out of the research all require the researcher to carefully consider the position and the well-being of the research participants, to empathize. The concept that a signed consent form is nothing more than your evidence *in case complaints arise*, completely obscures the values of care, responsibility, and sensitivity toward the other that should underpin all of our students’ research interactions (Solvason, 2017).

By championing an ethical approach which focuses on the values of the researcher within our course, the student is supported in securing a deeper understanding of what it means to be an ethical researcher, rather than a researcher who is ethically compliant (or who is careful to “watch their back”). Our principles are in part based upon the work of Bloor (2010) who views the “do no harm” mandate for researchers as wholly inadequate; instead, he contends that the social researcher has an “ethical *obligation* to bring about a good” (p. 17). This, Bloor argues, should not only be evident in the results

of a research project, but throughout the life of the research. This is a sentiment that we have embedded in our own research approach, meaning that in all research proposals we expect to clearly see how this “good” has potential to positively impact upon *the child*, but we also look for evidence of how sensitive and caring approaches are being considered *throughout* the project to all involved (Solvason, 2018).

What Support Do Our Students Receive?

Our students are prepared for their final year research project through a module which takes place in the previous year. When carrying out research in their final year, students receive six hours of one-to-one support from their dissertation supervisor, as well as four workshops by the dissertation lead, spaced throughout the year. All of this is university-based; tutors do not visit settings. All input is informed by McNiff and Whitehead's (2010) unique approach to action research, characterized by an emphasis on values and positive collaboration with others to co-create new practice knowledge.

Theoretical paradigms are important tools for supporting students to manage the research process while maintaining positive relationships with others. For this reason, it is vital that before beginning their research, students should comprehend the constructivist world view and become aware that there are as many answers to a research question as there are children, or settings, or practitioners (Walker & Solvason, 2014). We establish that a key aim of research is to consider different perspectives, to better “understand...the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1998, p. 221), or to become more aware of others’ “rich and contextually situated understandings” (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019, p. 227). As tutors we present the view that without this openness to learn from the views of others, no development in understanding can be made. Or, as Palmer (1998) puts it “Humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen” (p. 108).

Linked to this, students are encouraged to use methodological approaches predicated on the *positive potential* of cooperation. One example is Cooperrider and Fry's (2020) appreciative inquiry model (AI), defined by the authors as the “craft of asking questions that elevate a system's cooperative capacity to apprehend strengths and positive potentials, [to] unite around greater meanings and shared goals” (p. 267). This approach involves focusing on the positive aspects of an organization and learning from what they do well, rather than the tendency of so much research, to focus upon inadequacies to be fixed. The AI approach is inherently positive and collaborative and thus provides students with a framework to present their ideas for research to those in settings as activities which will encourage and nurture rather than finding fault or demeaning.

Another value promoted through the support module is influenced by McNiff's (2010) advice for researchers to be completely open to what they might find out through their research. McNiff (2010) cautions all researchers to remember to hold ideas "lightly and provisionally" (p. 37), to acknowledge the uncertain nature of knowledge, and reject the concept of a single right answer, avoiding temptations towards grandiosity. In other words, to move away from those dissertations which start with: "I'm right, and here's how I went about convincing others I was right," to openings that explain: "this is what I was unsure of, and here is how I went about discovering more about it with the help of others." Similarly, Costley et al. (2010) advocate for a reflexive approach, and Banks (2009) calls for a shift away from professional ethics being considered as an external area of study or a set of guidelines toward ethics being viewed as an everyday aspect of professional life, something which is part of the professional's character. Inherent in an ethical, reflective, and reflexive stance is being open to the ideas of others. Finally, Solvason (2018) suggests that the move away from the concept of researcher as expert to that of researcher setting out on an enquiry into something that they *know little about* (with the help of those in the setting), can make the dissertation a far less daunting prospect for inexperienced students.

Research Methods

Approach

It is impossible to measure in any numerical way the impact of small-scale research projects such as those our students carry out, as "there are areas of social reality which such statistics cannot measure" (Silverman, 2001, p. 32). Instead, our priority when we embarked on this small-scale research was to discover more about the students' and settings' experience of working together to carry out a research project collaboratively and to better understand the perception of both student and setting staff, in terms of what they felt had worked well and what needed developing. In this sense, this research is a case study, for as Stake (1994) explains, a "case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied" (p. 236).

As has been mentioned, the overall dissertation experience for the student is, to some extent, reflected in their final dissertation submission, but we recognized that the assessed nature of this work does not necessarily encourage *total* transparency, particularly if the experience was not especially positive. To enable a more transparent sharing of thoughts around the research experience, we were aware of the importance of removing ourselves as tutors from the equation, and this is where the role of students as collectors of data became

invaluable. In addition it was useful that the students collecting data for us were not from the same course, as this meant that they had no preconceptions of what positive or negative interactions or experiences on our course *should* be. In this position they could genuinely fulfil the role of naïve researchers (Estacio, 2012).

Full ethical approval was gained from the university for us to collect data from both students and settings staff, and all participants were made fully aware of their rights and choices, in line with the BERA (2018) *Ethical Guidelines* before participating. This included information related to what would happen with the data collected.

Data Collection

Although a focus group approach was originally identified as the best way to collect data from the students based upon the principle that “they have the advantage of making use of group dynamics to stimulate discussion, gain insights, and generate ideas in order to pursue a topic in greater depth” (Bowling, 2002, p. 394), unfortunately, our final approach to data collection from students looked quite different. In the initial furore provoked by COVID-19, the whole research project was put on hold. When it was deemed appropriate to revisit the research almost 12 months later, our students were still under elevated pressure, struggling with the additional demands of negotiating their practice experience and studying online and at a distance through the pandemic. For these reasons we did not feel comfortable placing additional demands on them (even if that was only taking part in an online focus group discussion). As a result, we reluctantly changed our data collection method for students to an online survey.

Although survey may have hampered the depth of responses that we received, there were also some advantages. One was that the survey was sent to a wider range of students ($n = 96$) than would have been included in the focus group interview approach. Another was that the survey enabled greater consistency across the two samples' data collection. We had already identified online survey as the most appropriate way of collecting data from the settings ($n = 87$), and using this approach for both groups of participants meant that we could present the same range of questions to both practitioners in settings (kindergarten and school teachers) and university students, with just slight changes in wording.

The surveys were emailed to our students through our usual communication channels and were sent out to all settings who were working with one of our final year students. The member of staff at the setting who had worked most closely with the student (usually the student mentor) was invited to respond.

All surveys required the participant to acknowledge that they were over 18 years of age and had read the research information sheet that preceded the survey before they completed their responses.

Some of the survey questions were closed, requiring a simple yes or no answer, for example: “Did you share your research plans with the setting [staff] prior to starting your research?” or “Did your student share their research plans with you prior to them starting their research?” Other questions were more open ended, inviting more qualitative data. For example, we asked respondents whether they felt that the research impacted upon practices or processes in the setting in any way, adding: “Could you please explain your answer?” The survey remained open for one month, with a reminder email sent at the beginning of the final week.

Results

Respondents to the survey included 22% of students ($n = 19$) and 11% of setting staff ($n = 10$). Most setting responses were brief, completing the closed questions only. The data were first considered by researchers individually, who identified emerging themes before coming together to compare and verify these. The data were then reduced, identifying whether there were sufficient responses to evidence the key point under investigation, and finally reorganized into a logical argument (Wellington, 2015). The key themes identified are explored below. The voices of the student and setting staff are presented in italics, to enable easy identification. Quotations are followed by part of the code assigned to the individual respondent through the anonymous survey to enable differentiation in responses. We acknowledge that the small percentage of response rate means that we are not able to present these as representing the whole, but the responses still present significant ideas that are worthy of exploration.

A Collaborative Approach to the Research

Across all setting participant and student responses, all but one student indicated that productive discussion took place between the setting and student before they began their research. The one anomaly was a student’s study that did not collect empirical data but was literature based. These initial discussions were reported to take place with a range of staff—teacher mentors, early years leads, teachers, and head teachers—and it was encouraging that two students reported discussing their topics with all practitioners at the setting (502, 326). The setting respondents did not further elaborate on these initial discussions, but most of the students did. Although around half of the student responses suggest that their ideas were simply approved by the relevant staff member,

other responses suggest a genuinely collaborative approach between setting staff and student, for example:

We discussed what would be best for me and the setting that would benefit us both. (023)

We discussed topics I was interested in, and they think would benefit the school. (755)

My idea was taken on enthusiastically as I explained I would use out-comes to try to improve practice. (679)

Additionally, some students showed real sensitivity to the needs of the setting and initiative in their identification of an area of study. For example, one student responded that their topic emerged through observation in the setting (502) and another that they had “cross-referenced” their own areas of interest with those highlighted in the school improvement plan (577). Another student reported taking extra care with the approach, aware that it was a sensitive topic, explaining, “I wanted to explore children’s mental health but wanted to clarify with the teacher what topic would be suitable and ethical” (109). All students who carried out their research in a setting reported that they were able to decide on a topic that was potentially beneficial for both themselves *and* their colleagues in the setting.

Although all staff and student responses indicate that data was collected in a sensitive and nondisruptive manner, six of the students said that they had not explicitly discussed their means of collecting data with the setting staff. Three students, on the other hand, said that they had altered their approach as a result of this discussion. Several students reported changing their approaches due to the restrictions of lockdown, but the comments below indicate a sensitivity toward their settings that goes beyond simple practicalities. They shared:

I aimed to give them the questionnaire on the slowest day around the time children were asleep, so it gave them the opportunity to do it with little distractions or disruption. (739)

[I] changed data collection methods in order to adhere to COVID risk assessment and minimize pressure on participants due to being in lockdown. (577)

Research Impact

All students who collected empirical data reported sharing their findings with the setting staff. In their dissertation support they are strongly encouraged to choose an approach to sharing findings that is suitable for the setting, and it was encouraging to see the range of ways that this was done. They included:

- I created an information poster of the highlights of the data collected (109)
- Formal letter (755)
- A chat [informal discussion] and a poster (360)
- I plan to send an email to all participants stating my key findings. I also plan to do a short letter to parents of children who took part (126)
- I will advise the headteacher of my findings in person, and I will email to thank participants and inform them that way (235)
- I plan to send emails to all my participants; as it was small scale it is possible (796)
- Presentation. Have emailed this to staff so that it can be reviewed at their convenience (577)
- Staff meeting and power point presentation (922)
- During staff meetings at certain intervals during the research project (326)
- Inset day training (502)
- Leaflet (739)
- Dissemination poster (509)
- 1:1 meeting (453)

Encouraging as this is, the responses of the setting staff seem more inconsistent in this area. One staff respondent mentioned that: “I feel that the research helped the staff to rethink their practice to include more math opportunities for the children” (718), indicating that the research had been shared in a helpful way. And another said:

I think that, particularly under the circumstances, she has been very well supported by the University and that there is a strong positive impact on the setting as a whole for student research within the settings. (965)

Only four of the staff respondents stated that the findings from the research had been fed back to them (which is perfectly viable; after all, the range of setting represented in the data may be entirely different to the range of students), yet seven of the staff respondents shared their perception that the research had impacted upon the student. This is a little incongruent as it is fair to assume that it was necessary for staff to be aware of the research outcomes in order to recognize their impact upon the student. Interestingly, two of the staff responses refer to the fact that the student had increased their confidence through carrying out the research. One setting staff explained it this way:

She has grown in confidence when making suggestions to changes in practice that will positively impact the children, with the knowledge to thoroughly explain her ideas. (965)

Similarly, six student responses referred to the impact that the research had on their own practice. These responses demonstrate the ultimate aims of this

research approach—to improve practice for the benefit of the child and the family. Responses include:

Although I have not finished yet, I can already see how much it affects my beliefs. I would even like to go further and explore the topic more. I am considering change of a career to be involved with families more, rather than children. (679)

Knowledge gained from Lit Review to empower learning strategies. (376)

My understanding is strengthened so hopefully my practice will be enhanced. (326)

I know strategies which will help improve communication with parents. (739)

It has made me realize how important many different aspects [are that] can help a child's emergent literacy skills. (360)

A greater understanding of parent partnership. (671)

Some students shared how their research had impacted upon both them *and* the setting. For example, this student communicated how she had seen impacts upon colleagues in practice and how the setting had begun “working with one of the organizations discovered during my literature review to make long term curriculum changes” (577). Another student (502) mentioned that a new policy was being written for the setting as a direct result of her research.

When the students were asked whether they had received feedback from their settings after their research, some of their responses suggested further evidence of impact. These included the research providing opportunity for staff at the setting to appreciate the quality of work that they were already carrying out, with this student sharing: “They were shocked with how many different methods of communication they used because it was everyday practice; they forgot they were using them” (739), as well as identifying areas for further improvement. Other students shared how their research findings “showed gaps in what the parents thought” (755) and how a setting “used the data collected to re-evaluate the lay out of the setting” (360). These present genuine, impactful examples of partnership and knowledge exchange and development between setting, staff, and student.

Expectations of Faculty Tutors

It is important to recognize our own areas for improvement as faculty tutors, and one response that we received from a setting's member of staff suggested that tutors should take more of an active role in the student research. It said:

I have a new student, too—just started Year 1 (foundation degree) [first year of a two-year undergraduate degree course] on a part-time basis. With this student we are having regular practice partners meetings during this year over “Teams” [video conferencing]. For the student currently completing her independent study, this has not been the case. I feel if, as practice mentors, we had this type of support with our current student, I would have been able to give her better advice and guidance during the process. It would also be really good to have information on previous “outstanding” independent studies to support discussions with students around the types of studies they could research. Sometimes they do not realize how aspirational they can be and don’t always challenge themselves. (360)

This is very useful to us, not because we agree that we should be more involved with the student in their setting, but because it makes clear to us that we need to explain more clearly to settings’ staff our department’s position in terms of our dissertation students. Our view is that, as final year undergraduate students, these researchers are about to leave with a BA (Hons) degree and professional responsibility as *leaders of practice*. Their research project is an opportunity to rehearse that leadership role, and we purposefully keep our distance. Our students’ context is very different to those just beginning a Foundation Degree. The data suggests that we need to far more explicitly state this to staff at the settings.

Discussion

The timing of this research was unfortunate. Given that the research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic when those in settings were experiencing an unprecedented period of flux and increased workload, the low response to the survey was as expected. Most of the setting staff responses were brief, completing the closed questions only, but we were still appreciative of this considering the extremely traumatic period from which they were emerging, and the responses are worthy of respectful scrutiny. We have taken some key points for consideration away from the data, which we discuss below.

A Collaborative Approach to the Research

Student responses indicate that productive discussion took place between staff at the settings and students before they began their research. It could be argued that because our dissertation module is framed upon cooperation, this finding reflects nothing more than compliance, a necessary component, and by itself insufficient to demonstrate a praxis which promotes collaboration and

the co-creation of practice knowledge (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010). However, that some student discussions were with a range of practitioners or even *all* of the staff carries more credence in terms of demonstrating a genuine embodiment of the values introduced through this module—the need to seek respectful and *shared* understandings (Costley et al., 2010) and a democratic approach to knowledge creation (Jacobs, 2017). Likewise, although the staff responses indicate that all student data collection was nondisruptive, this could reflect the “sensitive and respectful ethical research approaches” as extolled by Solvason (2017, p. 174), or it might indicate that setting staff were merely untroubled or uninvolved beyond the initial discussions regarding research proposals. Indeed, the fact that six students confirmed their data collection methods were *not* discussed with their setting signifies a need for students to more appropriately keep staff involved *throughout* their research, rather than only at the initial and end stages. Nonetheless, findings do indicate clear evidence of students’ reflective practice (QAA, 2019) and management of dynamic relationships with others (Coghlan, 2019) in their efforts to prioritize the needs of settings rather than the outcomes of their dissertations.

Evidence of Impact

The evidence of positive impact on individual students is clear. Our preexisting anecdotal evidence from reflections within dissertations correlates with the findings that some students had grown in confidence and gained insights into future career paths. It was also reassuring to see that this was consistent with staff perspectives on their students. Regarding evidence of impact on *settings*, that the findings showed some students understood the benefits of shared understanding and trust (Costley et al., 2010) and consciously strove to effect these, implies a reciprocity which in itself achieves the ethical imperative “to bring about a good” (Bloor, 2010, p. 17), albeit implicitly. It was gratifying to identify additional, tangible instances of positive impact upon settings such as policy development, adaptations to physical environments, and illumination of good practice in the tradition of appreciative enquiry (Cooperrider & Fry, 2020).

Conclusion

The limitations of this research are clear—this was a small percentage of an already relatively small sample of approximately 100 students and settings. It cannot be deemed as representative. In addition, we did not have the opportunity to more deeply explore the emerging themes through interview. In further research it would be really interesting to discover how our particular approach

to research compares with other practice-based BA degrees—whether it is, indeed, as unique as we perceive it being. It would also be extremely helpful to revisit our original plans to interview students about this to delve more deeply into individual student experiences of research in practice.

As with all valuable research, this is both a useful affirmation that, at least in some cases, our teaching about ethical and caring research is seeing fruition, *we are getting it right*; whilst simultaneously presenting us with some future challenges. It is extremely rewarding to see that at least some of our students, even when carrying out research in the most challenging of pandemic circumstances, were able to make a positive impact upon their settings, with colleagues, children, and families. But as tutors, we also have some issues to address, and these include:

- How we encourage *all* our students to view research as an ongoing negotiation and collaboration with the relevant setting staff, and not as a situation where initial permission is gained and findings are fed back.
- Consideration of the most meaningful and appropriate ways for us, as a faculty, to open a dialogue with settings about our student research, our expectations, and what they should anticipate.

We espouse respectful and reciprocal understanding in research, but, as these responses suggest, it may be that our side in the setting staff/student/university communication triangle is the side that is missing. Perhaps conveying a wealth of information concerning aims and values to *students*, even *final year students*, is not enough. Perhaps we need also to make our intentions more explicit to *setting staff*. In this vein we also encourage settings to take a more proactive approach with students that mention research as part of their responsibilities within the setting. Question your students on the purpose of their research and how their discoveries might possibly impact upon the children and families that you support. If you have any doubts or any queries about this research, be sure to follow them up with the education institute contact that you hold for the student. Do not allow ambiguity where the best possible experience for the children in your care is concerned.

In response to the data discussed above concerning previous research, the DCF now regularly share summaries from student dissertations with partners in a quarterly research newsletter sent out to settings. Not only does this share some of our student research findings, but it also provides a useful source of Continual Professional Development (CPD) for settings. However, more clearly conveying research expectations to settings is something that remains for us to take forward if we are to effectively model the behaviors that we are expecting from our students in terms of an openness to, and learning from,

different perspectives. If we can convey these values more effectively, then that may provide an opportunity to open more channels of respectful, honest, and *ongoing* communication between setting staff and students in the process, with better outcomes for the child and the family always in mind.

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