

What is the impact of university work-based learning for early years practitioners in Norway and England? *Examples of processes, outcomes and impact from the undertaking of work-based projects*

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Abstract

This paper is focused on partnership work between academics in Norway and England involved in the teaching of university and work-based learning programmes. Initiated four years ago, the collaboration has developed into a community of practice involving a range of shared activities. These activities include academic and student exchanges, nursery visits, seminars and workshops, which culminate in a joint conference presentation. This paper explores the cultural and curricula differences between the two programmes, and considers how these impact on the individual practitioners undertaking them and on the settings in which they work.

The data draws on four students' experiences to exemplify learning in a work-based context. Ethical issues were addressed in a manner consistent with the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2011) guidelines for educational research, and the study utilised theoretical frameworks that drew on concepts of work-based learning (e.g. Colley et al., 2003). Findings suggest that, despite the significant differences in culture and curricula approach, both programmes appear to enhance the practice of practitioners in early years. Key impacts of the programme included evidence of personal change and professional development (Mpofu-Currie, 2015), which were reflective of democratic rather than instrumental notions of

professionalism (Atkins and Tummons, 2017). There was also evidence of significant gains in knowledge, manifested through improved pedagogy and more meaningful engagement with the children in each setting.

This work demonstrates the benefits of knowledge exchange and dialogue to promote cross-cultural learning experiences. The authors hope that it will inform the development of innovative work-based learning programmes and wider policy in relation to work-based learning, as well as knowledge transfer between Norway and England.

Key words Work-based learning; kindergarten; nursery; work-based projects; flexibility; formality and informality; learning from practice

Introduction

At Northumbria University (NU) in the UK and at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences (HiOA) in Norway, work-based programmes have been running since 2006/2007. At NU, work-based studies involve varied professional studies, but at HiOA the work-based studies form only a part of Early Childhood Teacher Education (ECTE). Based on the partnership initiated four years ago between the two institutions in Norway and England, the collaboration has developed into an international community of practice involving a range of shared activities that include academic and student exchanges, nursery visits, seminars, workshops and a joint conference presentation.

This relationship has provided the opportunity to examine how work-based learning really works for early years practitioners despite the cultural and curricula differences, and led to the project reported on in this paper. The project aims were to develop the existing international community of practice between academics in Norway and England, and to establish what lessons could be learned from case studies of early years work-based learning (WBL) practice in the two contexts. This second aim was achieved by focusing the investigation on the *Work-based Project*, a module that is undertaken by work-based learners in both countries. This module incorporates the principles of learning from work, with learners as agents of change within the workplace. This paper exemplifies processes, outcomes and impact from the undertaking of work-based projects.

The Context

The programmes in the two countries have some significant similarities and dissimilarities. Both cater for staff working in early years settings. These are known as nurseries in the UK, and kindergartens in Norway, and are referred to by the appropriate national term throughout this paper. The only significant difference between the two is that children in Norway attend kindergarten until the age of 6 since, in common with other Scandinavian countries, Norway has a later starting point for primary education than the UK. In England, the compulsory school starting age is the term after a child's fifth birthday. However, many children start reception class aged 4.

Both universities offer work-based undergraduate programmes leading to bachelor's degrees for early years practitioners, and both programmes are contextualised within government policy, legislation and regulation of their respective countries. However, there are significant differences between the two programmes. The HiOA programme, for example, is recognised as a teaching qualification and thus highly regulated according to the requirements for the curriculum for Early Childhood Teacher Education (ECTE) (Ministry of Education and Research, 2011a), National Guidelines for Early Childhood Teacher Education, 2012, Kindergarten Act (Ministry of Education and Research, 2005) as well as the National Quality Framework for Lifelong Learning (Ministry of Education and Research, 2011b). In contrast, the NU programme forms a continuing professional development (CPD) route so is less regulated. In response to global economics and technological advancement in the past two decades, the NU programme was developed to meet the government's desire for a more highly qualified workforce (Leitch Review of Skills, 2006) that was accompanied at that time by additional funding to support upskilling and professionalisation (see Mpofu-Currie, 2015 for details).

The curricula in each programme are reflective of these differences. The HiOA programme comprises eight compulsory modules to meet the requirements of the curriculum for ECTE. The NU programme content encompasses contemporary theory and legislation and its application to early years practice. Operating within a negotiated work-based learning framework, the programme allows individuals, groups and employers the flexibility to negotiate a programme of study that meets their specific needs and circumstances. This includes an Accreditation of Prior Experience and

Learning (APEL) module, meaning that individual students will access different modules at different levels according to their background. They choose from a menu of nine module options, the content of which is negotiated with the student and their employer. Thus, the concept of partnership working raised by Boud and Solomon (2001), Fuller and Unwin (2002) and Tynjälä (2008) is fundamental to this kind of provision. The programme is available at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Both programmes are designed exclusively for employed people, paid or voluntary, where the learners use their workplace and their practice as a context for learning: thus, all are mature and non-traditional students. The students participating in this study were also all part-time, although the HiOA programme also has a full-time option with placement. Work also provides the bulk of the content upon which the learners can reflect and extend their conceptual engagement while enabling them to meet and engage critically with professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements. In the more regulated HiOA programme, students have to meet the nationally mandated 100 days in placement, consisting of 60 days in unfamiliar nurseries and 40 days at their own workplace.

Perhaps most importantly, both programmes share a core philosophy that emphasises inclusion and diversity. Building upon the principle of ‘widening participation’ (Department of Education, 2012) and other policy initiatives, the NU programme responded to the challenge of creating new pathways into higher education to raise the level of skills in the UK while developing the potential of all people regardless of their earlier educational experiences or socio-economic position. Although the idea presented several challenges to the higher education sector in general, the programme realised great success in the region.

Similarly, the HiOA programme is a relatively recent innovation with an explicit philosophy that articulated the workplace as an arena for inclusion, and the promotion of diversity through inclusion and widening participation. It was the first example of work-based learning in Norway. In its early days it faced considerable criticism due to concerns that it might lack academic rigour. The programme has been extremely successful in challenging these established perceptions of the nature of theory and practice, reflected in the fact that the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research highlights the HiOA Work-based Early Childhood Teacher Education (ABLU) programme in current policy documents, making reference to the relationships and

synthesis between the workplace and professional education in a kindergarten context. It should be noted that the concept of learning from work is generally more readily accepted in England, although this has not always been the case.

Work-based Learning

Views on work-based learning vary between the learning that arises from everyday activity in the workplace and those aligned to university programmes that build upon learning from the workplace. Discourses on the learning that occurs in the workplace are dominated by terms like ‘organisational learning’, ‘the learning organisation’ or ‘continuing professional development’ (Eraut et al., 1998; Boud and Garrick, 1999). This literature, however, builds a strong case for the workplace as a legitimate context for learning. Advocates of work-based learning have queried limiting learning to the classroom, and argued that theory should not be separated from practice (Raelin, 2008; Stenström and Tynjälä, 2009). They argue that learning in this context does not see theory as divorced from practice or knowledge from experience, but as arising from reflection upon practice, although it is understood that certain conditions are necessary for this to happen effectively (Garraway et al., 2011).

The distinction between work-based learning and traditional learning is, according to Raelin (2008: 2), the ‘conscious reflection on actual experience’. Raelin proposed that work-based learning is more than ‘experiential’ learning, which is just about ‘adding a layer of experience to conceptual knowledge’ (p. 64). He maintains that theory and practice can be acquired at the same time. This perspective is one of the many seen from the ‘learning organisation’ discourse on the workplace as a setting for learning (Eraut et al., 1998; Boud and Garrick, 1999).

A helpful summary definition of work-based learning for higher education institutions is ‘the learning people do for, in and through work’ (University Vocational Awards Council, 2007), where it is also seen as a means by which those in work can undertake higher education qualifications (Costley et al., 2009). These definitions echo Boud and Solomon (2001: 4) who viewed work-based learning as ‘the term used to describe a class of university programmes that bring together universities and work organisations to create new learning opportunities in workplaces’.

Brennan (2005: 4) saw the emphasis as ‘demonstrating learning that has occurred through work-based activity, wherever and however this may be

achieved', thereby conceding the legitimacy of knowledge that comes from work. The key feature of this approach is that the context of the learning lies outside the university as much as it does within. Its academic focus is more on practical knowledge and learning in a work-based context than on disciplinary knowledge. A myriad of views on work-based learning are presented in literature, locating it within varying but related theoretical frameworks. For example, writing in 2003, Colley et al. sought to develop a model that illustrated the complexities of these different conceptions, and provided a framework for analysing work-based learning practice. This encompasses four aspects of formality and in/formality in learning, identified as Process, Location and Setting, Purposes, and Content. Drawing upon this framework helps us to understand the similarities and differences of the two programmes, and the contribution work-based learning can make to individuals and to organisations.

In terms of *process*, both programmes share elements of in/formality, though the extent of this varies. For example, while both programmes are grounded in the students' own practice, the HiOA programme is more constrained by external regulation, while the NU programme is negotiated with students. This is the key difference between the two institutions in terms of Colley et al.'s (2003) model and, superficially, it would seem to imply that if the model were described as a spectrum, NU and HiOA would be at very different places in terms of in/formality in learning. However, this does not appear to impact on the outcomes for students, or their perceptions of the programmes. In terms of *location and setting*, learning in both programmes takes place at work, at home, at the university, online, individually and collectively. The *purpose* of both programmes is to facilitate students from a widening participation cohort to gain academic qualifications, and the *content* of both programmes focuses on drawing clear relationships between expert knowledge/research and practice. Ultimately, despite their differences, both programmes are designed to meet the needs of the practitioner, their organisation and the communities they serve.

Methodology

The study was designed to capture the student's motivation for embarking on a university work-based learning programme and how the work-based project, as a core module, facilitated learning. We draw on data from four students' descriptions of their individual experiences of learning at work, two

each from England and Norway. These participants were a convenient, self-selected sample from the graduating cohorts in each country ($n > 20$). The data were derived from a qualitative questionnaire, and from the students' final projects on their programme of study. The questionnaire was constructed, and analysis informed by the theoretical frameworks offered by Colley et al. (2003). This was a small study and we do not claim definitive findings. Rather, we utilise our participants' stories to exemplify our findings and to build on Colley et al.'s (2003) work by making tentative suggestions about the implications of, and relationships between, learning and work in the context of early years practice in the UK and Norway. Our methodology – and our ethical framework – were also informed by our increasing interest, as teachers and mentors in work-based learning, in the development of knowledge that takes place through boundary crossing between workplace, mentoring groups, lessons at the University College and individual study, searching and reading research-based theory. Raelin (2008) and Akkerman and Bakker (2011) emphasise this kind of boundary crossing as a basic principle in work-based education.

Ethical issues were addressed consistent with university requirements and the BERA guidelines for educational research, and were predicated on our common value of respect for the individual.

We move on to present short narratives of our four participants, developed from our data, and then to a discussion of the findings and implications of the study.

Diane (Northumbria University)

Diane has over three decades of experience in child education and care, and works in a leadership position. She reported always having been highly motivated to undertake CPD but found the 'flexibility and accessibility' of the BA (Hons) Early Years Practice course more relevant to her development than traditional degree routes. She was also enticed by 'Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning', which she said promoted her confidence and encouraged her to access higher education, thus facilitating her to 'research and study realistic topics related to the workplace'. This 'impacts on positive outcomes for children and families and the learner develops both personally and professionally'.

Diane reported that during the programme she had developed her interest in outdoor learning by accessing external courses and in-house training as well as professional support from university tutors, practice consistent with

Nutbrown's (2012) advocacy of ongoing CPD for early years professionals. Diane's project was the 'successful' development and implementation of Forest School activity within her setting. Diane reported that this work-based project resulted in 'significant personal learning', 'a growth in confidence from sharing the learning with parents and practitioners' and the 'transformation of an excellent practitioner into a specialist educator', characteristics of work-based learning that were identified by Mpofu-Currie in 2015. This outdoor practice continues to inspire others, and offers learning and development opportunities for children and other practitioners beyond the lifetime of the degree course.

Sarah (NU)

Having just qualified as a nursery nurse, Sarah was introduced to work-based learning by the management team at her workplace. She readily embarked upon the BA (Hons) Early Years Practice, working systematically through the levels. The degree route incorporated her Early Years Professional Status, now known as Early Years Teacher Status, and she is now employed as a Senior Early Years Teacher in a private day nursery. Part of her role involves being a student mentor.

Sarah reported that she had noticed students and new employees struggling with the setting's induction process, thus identifying a need for 'induced change' (Rodd, 2006: 185) in her workplace. As her work-based learning project, she liaised with the management team, evaluated current practice and set out to streamline the induction process.

In addition to reporting 'personal and professional development' with regard to leadership, Sarah explained how the nursery had benefited from the changes. Feedback received when she evaluated her project highlighted how new employees 'feel welcome' and understand 'what is expected of them'. The children too benefit as 'through peer observations we have been able to identify new employees showing more confidence within their role'. Reflecting on her experiences, Sarah noted a growth in her confidence through the programme. She continues to use the new induction system and reports being 'intrinsically motivated by involvement'.

Astrid (HiOA)

Astrid has been working for 12 years in early childhood settings, five years in a leadership position. She was encouraged by her colleagues to apply for admission to the bachelor programme. Astrid's project aimed to enhance her colleagues' interest in professional development, regarding content as well as theoretical foundations of outdoor life and activities in the forest. She had observed that only one-third of her co-workers wanted to use the forest as 'the third pedagogue' (Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2007, drawing on Reggio Emilia) and that 'bad' weather conditions were the main reasons for cancelling weekly activities in the forest.

Astrid reported having discussions with her colleagues to help them to understand that their engagement, experiences and competences were important as a foundation for establishing a culture for outdoor life in their kindergarten. Together they planned and implemented activities, and Astrid claimed they all learned by 'participating in the activities' as well as by 'reflecting' afterwards, data consistent with conceptions of learning as a dialogic and social process (e.g. Bandura, 1977). According to Astrid, the kindergarten's practice has changed: she reports that she and her colleagues now go to the forest regardless of the weather. They are more confident and have a common understanding of their practice.

Reflecting on her programme, Astrid summarised her primary learning outcome as the importance of having a 'prime mover' with a specific goal, who can justify professional practice and apply professional concepts. She considered that the project changed her as a person. She stated that being able to argue her professional opinion relating to educational work with children has reinforced her professional self-confidence. She perceived that her colleagues appreciated her commitment, and she felt comfortable concerning the impact of the project upon children's learning and their enjoyment of the weekly activities in the forest.

Petter (HiOA)

Petter is a mature individual with 10 years' experience as a co-worker in early childhood settings. He reported having embarked on the ABLU programme as an opportunity to develop professional knowledge related to his daily work and to gain a bachelor degree while earning money to support his family.

Petter's project was carried out in order to facilitate increased knowledge about science didactics for both children and adults, to examine how children

learn and how to facilitate children's learning. Practical in nature, and conducted with children and colleagues, it focused on the topic 'earthworm'. Pedagogic activities included building a crate ('home') for the earthworms, and investigating what they ate and what they did. Petter also organized gatherings, talks, reflections, and arts and crafts related to these topics, highlighting the importance of 'social participation and dialogue' (Coffield, 2000) in learning at all levels. He stated that his project choice was motivated by the close proximity of his kindergarten to the forest, and the cultural importance of the landscape. His own development of knowledge included reading textbooks about science, leadership and didactics, and by engaging actively with the children and co-workers during the project. Petter summarised his learning benefits thus: 'It seems to be a constructive pedagogic strategy to conduct a science project in kindergarten over a long period of time. Both children and the adults had ample time to explore the topic and gain new knowledge.' Petter concluded that projects covering a more extended time frame might be useful to create interest and involvement among the co-workers, an observation consistent with work by Bulunuz (2013) who argues that science delivered via 'direct instruction' generates less understanding than that taught using more informal methods such as that utilised by Petter.

Discussion

It was apparent that throughout the students' experiences, flexible work-based learning was valued. All the students were inspired to develop themselves personally and professionally, and they identified the need for, then created, change within their early years setting. Other practitioners were also influenced by training opportunities, skills development, teamwork, enthusiasm for change and reflective practice. The findings from the students' accounts fell into three broad themes: the opportunities offered by the programmes; learning outcomes and the impact on students; and children and staff. In respect of their motivation for embarking on work-based learning, the students cited 'flexibility' as the main incentive as it afforded them various opportunities as practitioners. Key aspects of this flexibility included accessibility, in terms of the ability to learn and study at the same time, as well as the acknowledgement of pedagogical knowledge and expertise as creditworthy, something that allowed the commencement of study at a level commensurate with this experience and expertise (APEL). Importantly, the acknowledgement of the workplace as a learning environment formed a key aspect of the 'flexibility', since this meant that the time they spent in practice

was essentially also part of their study time. Also of significant importance to the students was the potential for work-based study to translate readily into positive outcomes for both the children and the organisation. Students saw work-based learning – in particular the projects they undertook – as a vehicle to meet these outcomes, reflecting both the ‘authentic practice’ and ‘synergies between practices and settings that ensure successful learning’ that arises from different features of formal and informal learning in different locations and settings (Colley et al., 2003: 31).

These findings are consistent with work by Mpofu-Currie (2015), which also identified accessibility as a key incentive for work-based learners embarking on higher education. The students in her study, like those in ours, were mature learners with significant family commitments. Mpofu-Currie (2015) notes that these commitments mean that many cannot afford to study full time and support their families at the same time. The flexibility to study part time therefore was seen to offer a ‘golden opportunity’ to access higher education and develop personally and professionally. This concept of opportunity was also reflected in Higher Ambitions (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009, para 36: 37): ‘adults in the labour market who do not have higher education qualifications deserve a second chance to improve their own and their families’ economic positions’. However, according to Nurse (2007), when these groups of mature students are given the opportunity to return to study towards higher qualifications, they lack confidence and are nervous about their academic ability and about their right to a place at the university. Our own participants identified ‘confidence building’ as one of the benefits gained through the work-based project.

The work-based project is a single module that is undertaken by work-based learners in both countries. It is this module that incorporates the principles of learning from work, with learners as agents of change within the workplace. In order to explore the learning outcomes desired by the students, it is therefore essential to examine the motivation for the choice of project. It should be noted that while the English students could choose whatever project they wished to implement (described as ‘less formal’ by Colley et al., 2003: 31), albeit arising from an organisational need, the Norwegian students’ choice was thematically limited by the disciplines of their chosen in-depth study, reflecting more formal, specified outcomes (Colley et al., 2003: 31). Still, all had wide possibilities of choice, seen in their topics, and all had an emphasis on workplace competence, described as ‘informal’, reflecting the

‘complex ramifications of in/formality in different learning settings’ (Colley et al., 2003: 31).

Reasons for choice of projects are quite complex and varied, ranging from the location of the nursery to earlier individual reading and knowledge of research in the field. The rationale for choice included research (all participants), resources available (Astrid), children’s abilities, location of nursery (Petter), wishes and needs of children (Diane, Petter), workplace (Sarah, Astrid), learning interests and observations (all participants).

It is interesting that all the students based their choice on the needs of others, as well as learning interests – either their own or of others at work. For some, their choice was explicitly based on observations and discussions at work. These points may be of interest in the examination of what learning arises from project work. While the personal element naturally plays a part in the choice of project, it seems to be intimately connected to the needs of the workplace (Sarah, Astrid), adults (Sarah, Diane, Astrid) and children (Petter, Diane). This also involves the positioning of self: a connection is established between the personal learning interest and the identified needs of others. Thus, the self is not placed at the centre of attention. This in turn will influence the kind of learning process that occurs, which, as in the case of all our participants, can then reflect greater reflexivity.

The learning process for all students in both institutions bore elements of formality and informality (Colley et al., 2003). All reported utilising traditional, ‘formal’ academic approaches, such as studying and reading literature. However, they also stressed the importance of reflection together with colleagues and fellow students, and more ‘informal’ practical activities. For example, Petter explicitly mentioned the usefulness of engaging actively with the children, and all students noted the importance of practical activities for learning. Formal pedagogical documentation and evaluations following activities were also seen as actions that support learning. For example, Astrid reported that she learned by having set targets, and Sarah explicitly mentioned opportunities for reflective practice as especially useful for her learning process.

All the students described their learning process as involving different activities in different settings, such as in the library, kindergarten, and reflection groups. In this way, their learning process can be understood both as formal and informal, but also as repeated boundary crossings. Boundary crossing is seen as a learning potential, and a boundary is understood as a

sociocultural difference leading to discontinuity in action and interaction (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011). All the students cross boundaries between different communities of practice – in kindergarten, among fellow students, between the individual and the textbooks, in discussions with tutors and so on. Boundaries trigger dialogue and negotiation of meaning. A boundary object is a mediating artifact, and the students' projects are meant to initiate dialogue and negotiation of meaning at the boundaries. Their own work experiences are their starting point for these dialogues. By negotiating meaning through dialogues, they come to realise and explicate differences between practices. In this way they learn about their own and others' practices. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) identify four potential learning mechanisms at the boundaries: identification, coordination, reflection and transformation. All these are clearly present in the students' responses.

The identification process occurs by defining one practice in light of another, delineating how it differs from other practices, and is the first step in all the projects. Akkerman and Bakker (2011: 143) go on to discuss how some studies 'describe learning at the boundary as a matter of co-ordination' where boundary objects facilitate learning through boundary crossing. Reflection involves perspective-making, and can be seen as the students' ability to formulate distinctive perspectives. Both perspective-making and perspective-taking are dialogical and creative by nature. Reflection differs from identification by expanding students' perspectives. According to Akkerman and Bakker (2011) reflection 'results in expanded sets of perspectives and thus a new construction of identity that informs future practice' (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011: 146). All the students' projects can be interpreted as expanding perspectives on their practice. Their changed ways of thinking and their enhanced reflection is internal and individual, but still have consequences for their workplaces, by their changed practice, if we assume Akkerman and Bakker's (2011) definition of learning. They employ the term learning in a very broad sense, including new understandings. In the context of this definition of learning, institutional learning occurs.

The final learning mechanism Akkerman and Bakker (2011) identify is that of transformation. Transformation leads to profound changes in practices like Astrid's and Sarah's, or even the creation of new practices, like Diane's. Our findings may indicate that transformation impacted on all our participants' practices and caused collective learning. Thus, the clear changes in practice at work that are reported by the participants may be interpreted as transformation. Change in other employees' practice may also be interpreted

as an expression of the connection that seems to have been established between individual learning and collective changes in daily practice in the actual nurseries. The responses suggest that one student's learning process may influence the workplace and its practices. One example would be Diane, who described how attitudes and practices in her nursery changed due to the project she implemented. Astrid's project also contributed to change: staff members came to perceive outdoor life and the forest differently, and this in turn had consequences for their daily practice and actions in the nursery.

Impact

The study aimed to identify the impact upon practitioners of undertaking work-based learning, with a focus on the final-year project they completed. The personal impacts related to learning were clear, and examples included a range of self-reported learning gains such as increased knowledge and understanding of the subject matter (Petter); mentoring skills (Sarah); critical thinking and research skills (Diane); and greater understanding of how children learn in woodland spaces (Astrid).

To a certain extent, learning remains a conceptual and linguistic construction that changes with culture and context, albeit one that is 'inextricably linked with questions of power and purpose' (Colley et al., 2003: 31). Sfard (1988), for example, saw the nature of learning as a contest between the metaphor of acquisition and that of participation. Each of these metaphors has certain implications for how learning is defined. Davies (1998: 154) noted that when 'cognitive knowledge' is allied with 'applied knowledge' it creates an understanding that enhances creativity and self-motivation, qualities that are highly desirable in all the diverse learning contexts. Winch (2013) differentiated between practical and theoretical aspects of knowledge, while Avis and Atkins (2017), Atkins (2017), Bathmaker (2013) and Ecclestone (2011) have all raised related questions about the nature and value of different types of knowledge in different contexts. The students also identified increased confidence, a sense of satisfaction and self-esteem as key impacts of their programmes. This reflects the findings from a study on variation in early years practitioners' conceptions of university work-based learning (Mpofu-Currie, 2015) in which six conceptions were identified. Three of these were: access to a wide range of sources of knowledge leading to an inquiring mind; learning that makes you reflect on and review your practice; and changing as a person as you gain in knowledge and confidence.

Increased knowledge of children's learning processes was also mentioned, along with reflection. This may be observed in the data, which implies a significant impact not just on the students but on the children, the setting and colleagues and this was true of all participants irrespective of programme or country. For example, in terms of the projects that the students elected to undertake, all were contextualised around issues identified within the work setting or as an opportunity to be an agent of change. While some of these issues related to staff development, and others related to pedagogy, there were identifiable outcomes to the benefit of the children as well as to the practitioners as a consequence of all the projects.

The focus on children and their experience was apparent across responses from all participants. For example, by developing new staff and increasing their confidence in their roles through Sarah's new induction process, she reported that they had 'more understanding of [the children's] daily routines... staff were observed to have enhanced "communication with children"'. In reflective activity with young children, Diane recognised how working in the forest school 'strengthens their willingness to learn and retain knowledge. Children feel valued... and become self-regulated learners', while in Norway, Astrid's project inspired confidence within the outdoor environment for both children and adults. Children learned to 'respect ... the invisible borders' and there was a marked difference in their play and behaviour. Similarly, Petter's science project was observed to 'trigger children's inherent desire to learn, explore and play' and developed his own project-based leadership.

A key theme from the data was the importance of choice and flexibility available to the participants in terms of self-directing their own learning and being able to develop practice in their own setting, something that the participants saw as key to their personal and professional development.

Our participants identified a range of opportunities for learning in the workplace, and these included, for example, meetings, discussions with colleagues, and the development of policies and procedures. Such activities are inherently participatory, consistent with arguments that workplace learning is a social and communal endeavour, shared among a community of practice (see Lave and Wenger, 1991; see also Winch's (2013) discussion on the social aspects of practical knowledge). Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) describe this as a 'complex interrelationship' between organisational and policy contexts, communities of practice, and individual worker dispositions to learning.

This complex interplay can be seen in some of our participants' learning activities. For example, Sarah's re-design of systems and policies, together with the development of a new induction process, formed a significant part of the work presented for her academic award; her focus for this project might be argued to have been driven by her own disposition to learning, as well as to work. In addition, the policies and procedures came to form an integral part of the organisational policy context, also forming a response to regulatory requirements arising from government policy. The introduction of these policies would impact directly on new and existing staff and, by extension, on the children using the setting.

Interestingly, although the participants identified a broad range of activities and learning that took place in their workplace, they did not make any clear or specific connection between the activity and the learning they derived from it. Given the practical nature of the activities they identified, this would seem to support Eraut's (1994: 39) argument that most practical knowledge is probably acquired without the individual realising that they are learning at all. This is consistent with Colley et al.'s (2003) finding that much of the learning described by young nursery nurses was 'clearly embodied'.

According to Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of community of practice, all the students are members of different communities. They state the importance of being a part of the community in the kindergarten and among fellow students. Earlier research indicates that participating in such communities is of great value to professional learning (Kaarby and Lindboe, 2016).

These different theoretical conceptions of work-based learning reflect its complexity, but all emphasise learning as social practice while addressing a range of inter-relationships. Further, all these conceptions identify the crucial importance of developing new and advanced understandings as a consequence of engagement with work-based learning, echoing Eraut's (1994: 25) argument that a central purpose of continuing professional development was to inform professionals of new knowledge and ideas in their area of practice.

Conclusion

The project aims were to develop the existing international community of practice between academics in Norway and England, and to establish what lessons could be learned from case studies of early years work-based learning practice in the two contexts. In terms of lessons learned, our most striking finding is the similarities in students' statements concerning their professional learning and their projects' impact on children and staff in their kindergartens. This contrasts with the differences both in curricula and in the structures of the programmes. The participants' accounts also suggest that project work in work-based programmes supports a variety of learning processes: personal, workplace and traditional academic learning. Project work thus enables and makes visible a close connection between work, workplace and education as regards learning. This might be due to the fact that project work combines the learning interest of the individual student with the needs observed at work involving the community of adults and children in the nursery. Motivation, and thus the learning process, may be encouraged by basing the project on observed needs, leading to a connection between individual and collective learning. Project work, as described by the students, binds together work and education, individual and community of practice. According to Grimen (2008), practice is the core element in professional knowledge, and in ECTE one could say that children constitute the 'core element' that practice and theories relate to.

For those designing university programmes, the message seems to be that there needs to be an element of flexibility and choice, as this increases motivation and incentive to learn, particularly among mature, employed, students. This is illustrated by the fact that all our participants identified 'flexibility' as a key motivation to study, with emphasis on the ability to continue to work and meet family commitments. This resonates with views from Rawlings (2008), who discussed a wide range of life and work experiences that could influence how early years practitioners develop as learners. Other studies conducted on the subject also reflect this view (Kendall et al., 2012; Payler and Georgeson, 2013; Cotton, 2013). It is also worth noting that while this study relates to work-based learning among early years practitioners, the findings may have relevance for other work-based learning programmes, particularly those involving work in care settings.

Finally, some reflections on the development of a community of practice. Our community – academics involved in work-based learning – had a common purpose or 'shared endeavour' (Wenger, 2011) in developing practice within our programmes by working together to develop our understanding of how

our students learn and come to understand their own practice. It reflected Wenger's (1998) argument that practice is not just practical or theoretical, ideals and reality or talking and doing, but encompasses all these and, in doing this, we have also been able to reflect on our own practice and consider ways forward for both our programmes and for ourselves as a community. We hope to be able to build on our experience with this paper by continuing our collaboration, and undertaking more extensive empirical work that will contribute to understandings of how learning takes place in the workplace.

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