

University Work Based Learning as a vehicle for early years practitioners professional development.

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# UNIVERSITY WORK BASED LEARNING (UWBL)

UWBL takes many different forms although it can generally be divided into two categories:

- the learning that arises from everyday work activity in the workplace
- learning provided by universities on programmes that build upon learning from the workplace.

There are no tensions or contradictions between these two ways of thinking about learning as these university accredited programmes recognise the knowledge, skills and expertise gained from practice.

(Notably through Accreditation for Prior Experiential Learning- APEL processes)

# THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND UWBL

- Advocates of Work Based Learning query limiting learning to the classroom and argue that theory should not be separated from practice ( Raelin, 2008; Stenström and Tynjälä, 2009).
- The workplace is accepted as a legitimate site for learning where theory is not seen as divorced from practice or knowledge from experience. Learning is seen as arising from reflection upon practice although it is understood that certain conditions are necessary for this to happen effectively (Garraway et al. 2011).
- According to Raelin (2008, p.2) work based learning differs from traditional learning, in the 'conscious reflection on actual experience'. Raelin proposes that work based learning is more than 'experiential' learning which is just about 'adding a layer of experience to conceptual knowledge' (p.64).
- He suggests that theory and practice can be acquired at the same time. However, this perspective is one of the many seen from the 'learning organisation' discourse about the workplace as a setting for learning (Eraut et al.,1998; Boud & Garrick, 1999).

# PERSPECTIVES OF UWBL

- University work based learning has been linked to global economies and related factors that contributed to its advent as an alternative to traditional university programmes.
- Consequently one of the most used summary definitions of work based learning for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is 'the learning people do for, in and through work' (UVAC 2007), where it is also seen as a means by which those in work can undertake higher education qualifications (Costley et al., 2008).
- Such definitions echo Boud and Solomon (2001, p.4) who put it simply as:  
'Work -based learning is the term used to describe a class of university programmes that bring together universities and work organisations to create new learning opportunities in workplaces.'
- This is the kind of programme under discussion here.

# THE UWBL PROGRAMME.

- The programme of study is negotiated between the learner, their organisation and the university.
- For each 60 credit award which constitutes a year of study, learners are supported to devise their own programme of study and to select from a menu of generic modules that incorporate learning contracts, independent study and work based investigations, continuing professional development portfolios, work based projects culminating in a review of how they have managed their own learning at the end of the programme.
- The process of putting together such a programme means the learner is in charge of their own learning. The university provides them with the tools to use the key drivers of their organisation and their work role to identify what prior knowledge and expertise they can draw upon to address any development needs appropriate to their role. This approach sets the learner up as an autonomous learner right from the beginning of the programme.
- In their first year of study the learners are given an option to gain credits for knowledge and expertise from their practice through Accreditation for Prior Experiential Learning (APEL), thereby giving value to the years of experience in practice.
- Briefly, this constitutes the university work based learning experience that led to the six ways in which university work based learning was conceptualised by the practitioners in the research.

# 3 WAY PARTNERSHIP



# WHY EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS?

In the Early Years Workforce Strategy (DfE, 2017), one of the latest of government initiatives to develop the early years workforce, Caroline Dinepage (MP), Minister for Women, Equalities and Early Years states,

‘...if we want our children to have the best experience in their earliest and most formative years, we must invest in and value those who are shaping their early development’ (p.5).

At the end of the 1990s the Department for Education and skills estimated that the childcare and related services were one of the fastest growing sectors of the UK labour market (DfES, 2002a).

Yet professional development for the Early Years Sector has been subject to many a government initiative. In the past eighteen years the sector has seen a range of policy initiatives including:

- The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (DfEE, 2000)
- The ‘Birth to Three Matters’ (DfES , 2002b)
- Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003)
- Early Years Foundation Stage (DfCSF 2008) and its later version (DfE, 2012).

## EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The professional development, education and training of those working with children has varied according to the services they work for and qualifications have ranged from none to postgraduate level (Nurse, 2007).

- Owen (2006) identified 77 different qualifications for people working in various roles and settings in this sector.
- In 2008 private, voluntary and independent providers accounted for 80% of childcare provision.
- Meanwhile, only 3% of full day care staff were qualified to graduate level, compared to 40% of Early Years staff in maintained primary schools (DCSF, 2008b).
- In 2012 the Nutbrown review identified 445 different qualifications found within the workforce, with 223 of them considered full and relevant (Nutbrown, 2012). The government made a commitment to address these disparities by 2015.
- As a result of this wave of interest, professional development has featured a great deal in literature and research involving early years' practitioners. Horden (2013) examined the identified diverse development opportunities characteristic of this sector, reflecting the absence of a co-ordinated approach to their professional development

# DEFINING EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS

- Nurse (2007, p.3) defined early years practitioners as ‘all those who work with young children and their families, who have some training and expertise, but with differing qualifications and experience’.
- According to Nurse, when this group of mature students is 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.
- A similar view was held by Rawlings (2008) who discussed a wide range of life and work experiences that could influence how the practitioners develop as learners.
- Other studies conducted on the subject of the practitioners’ professional development also reflected these observations (Kendal et al. 2012; Payler and Georgeson, 2013; Cotton, 2013). In the conceptions study (Mpofu-Currie, 2015) the early years practitioners expressed similar views about their confidence levels and concerns that their experience and expertise is not recognised or valued enough.

## RESEARCH WITH EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS

- From their findings, Lightfoot and Frost (2014), recommended a transformative professional development programme that would value and enable the practitioners to work effectively within their networks and support the work they do with the children and their families (p. 415).
- This is embedded in the 2017 Early Years Workforce Strategy and Lightfoot and Frost's (2014) assessment that the practitioners seek professional learning that will empower them to transform themselves as well as their contexts.
- Conception 6 of the conceptions study (Mpofu-Currie, 2015) was concerned with this idea of transformation.
- Lightfoot and Frost also identified belonging to a setting-based group as supportive of transformational development, a view expressed in Conception 2 of the Conceptions Study.

# CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

With specific reference to early years practitioners, 'democratic professionalism,' (Oberhueme, 2005 p.13) is a way of conceptualising the professional role.

It is associated with collaborative engagements between colleagues and other professionals, wider networks and the communities around them.

In democratic professionalism, Early Years Practitioners are seen as engaged in four areas:

- interacting with children;
- centre management and leadership;
- partnerships with parents
- the professional knowledge base.

## DEMOCRATIC PROFESSIONALISM AND LIFELONG LEARNING

- Democratic professionalism 'informs professional action and presupposes an awareness of 'multiple ways of knowing', an understanding that knowledge is, in fact, contestable. It requires a willingness and ability to reflect on one's own taken-for-granted beliefs' (Oberhueme, 2005 p.13).
- This sees the multifaceted practitioner role as a basis for constant re-invention of themselves and the way they engage with individuals, groups and concepts.
- The views expressed here echo principles of Lifelong Learning, which Uzunboylu (2011) defines as embracing 'skills that allow the learner to apply and continue to develop their current learning to new contexts in their lives as the need arises', giving the learner the 'confidence, creativity and intellectual curiosity to explore different ways of tackling problems, enabling them to keep up with the fast changing world of information, work and life'.
- Early Years Practitioners conceptions of UWBL highlighted these attributes (Mpofu-Currie, 2015), as will be seen in the practitioners interview extracts.

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Generally, definitions of professional development refer to different activities that involve training; education; acquisition and amassing of professional knowledge and skills; keeping up with professional standards, some of which require a university degree as a minimum.
- In present-day global economic and technological advancements, it is expected that practitioners will continuously engage in activities that keep them current and up to date in their fields of practice.
- In an attempt to define professional development, Schwartz and Bryan (1998) adopted the terminology by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) where it is divided into **formal**, **non-formal** and **informal** education.

# CPD CONTINUED

- **Formal** education refers to traditional classroom education.
- **Non-formal** education encompasses any organized educational activity provided to a specific group of people.
- **Informal** education, on the other hand, refers to various activities which employees can engage in, like workshops, seminars, skills training and so on.
- Informal learning is about learning from one's environment and from those around them, be it spontaneously, incidentally or by arrangement. This can be through observation of others; what Schwarts and Bryan (1998, p. 8) refer to as 'learning by association and affiliation.' Bhola (1983, p. 47) suggests that this accounts for the bulk of one's accumulation of knowledge, skills and attitudes throughout life.
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## RESEARCH : EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS CONCEPTIONS OF UWBL (MPOFU-CURRIE,2015)

This research was conducted with 7 Early Years Practitioners engaged in a university work based learning programme similar to the one defined by Boud and Solomon (2001)

The research, which examined variation in early years practitioners' conceptions of UWBL (Mpofu-Currie, 2015) and a review of findings from other research on early years practitioners' personal and professional development indicated that UWBL can make a significant contribution towards the professional and personal development of the practitioners.

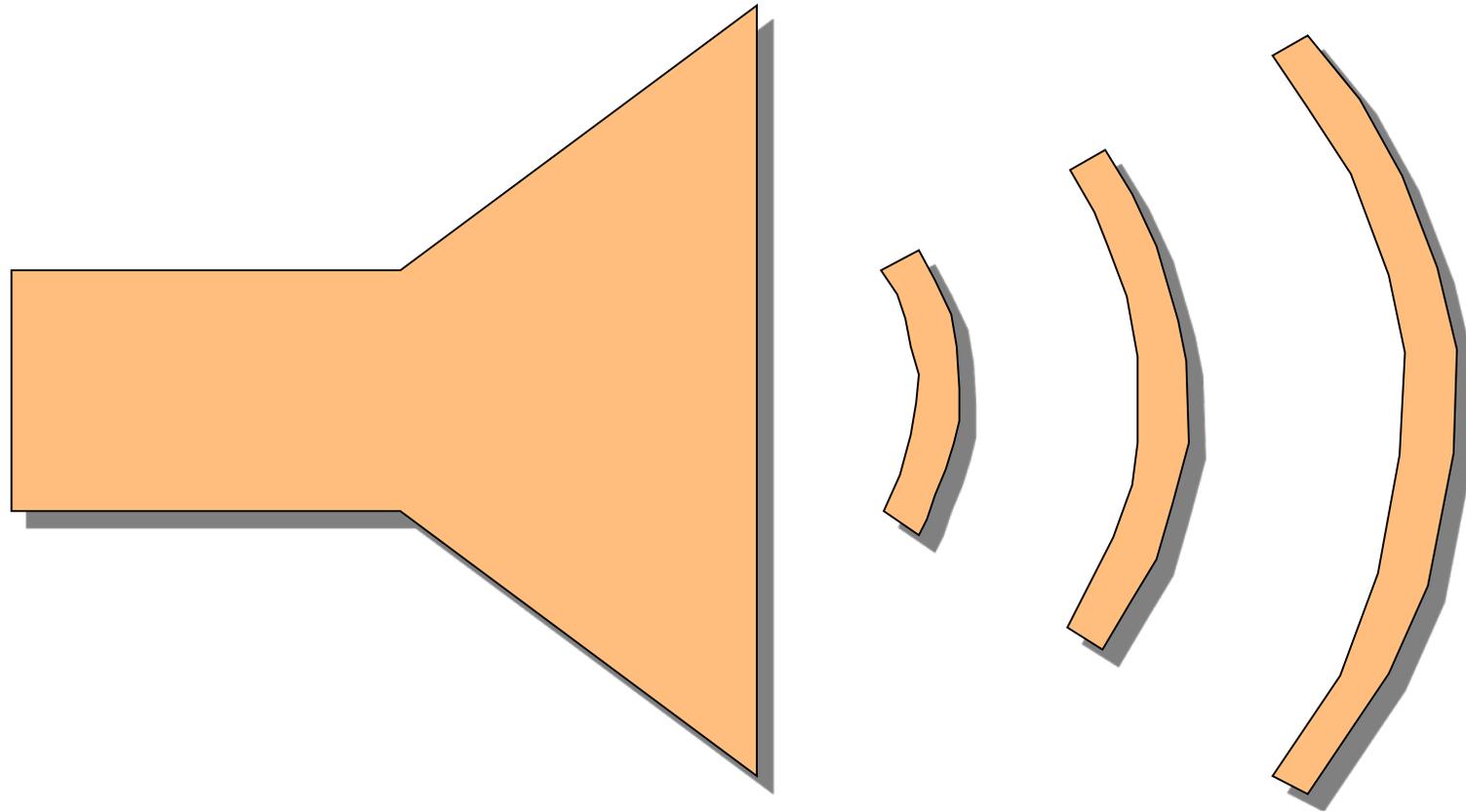
The findings of the study indicated very close links between this programme and the challenges faced by those working in the Early Years Sector in relation to accessing Higher education, recognition and status.

The same conceptions indicated that practitioners developed Lifelong Learning attributes through tools, skills and attitudes developed through the practitioners time at the university, particularly the opportunity to learn from their workplaces and the university simultaneously.

# EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS CONCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY WORK BASED LEARNING

1	<b>An opportunity for career progression and professional recognition.</b>
2	<b>Learning as a group with support from work colleagues and university peers.</b>
3	<b>Learning that is pertinent to your work.</b>
4	<b>Access to a wide range of sources of knowledge leading to an inquiring mind.</b>
5	<b>Learning that makes you reflect on and review your practice.</b>
6	<b>Changing as a person as you gain knowledge and confidence.</b>

# WHAT THE PRACTITIONERS SAID



## CONCEPTION 1 : AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CAREER PROGRESSION AND PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION.

Eventually I'd like to move out of private day care. .. maybe into a school .... and I think to be able do that you've got to have a higher qualification. There's not many jobs out there...

I've had a long career now and realised that you know it didn't matter what type of training I did...I did management training .. in the later years...a lot of courses a year...two years.. it still didn't feel we were getting any recognition for it as professionals in early years.

I though, well, I think this is the best route for me. You know, if I can APEL and let people see what stage I'm at, I feel I've at least gained some benefit of all the knowledge I've had over the last few years of my career. I think acknowledgement is the big thing.

## CONCEPTION 2: LEARNING AS A GROUP WITH SUPPORT FROM WORK COLLEAGUES AND UNIVERSITY PEERS.

..... having the university classmates who are within the sectors that you are in and I can have that breadth of knowledge that you can share together....

learning from different angles...like from different people of the group because .....each one of us have different experience and just learning through that as well, it's been great..... And it's allowed, as well, me to know more about the procedures, the policies, the theories. It's a lot of knowledge I gained to be honest.

..after having discussions with everyone at uni and talking to me work based manager, I feel like an established professional I feel like I do know what I'm talking about and that I have relevant information to share which other people can find useful, you know

## CONCEPTION 3: LEARNING THAT IS PERTINENT TO WORK

But also now I'm making a massive difference to the things I'm doing will become part the setting I'm in now and I'm hopefully inspiring my staff to get on board with that and make changes and, you know help the children and families that will access the setting for years to come because hopefully of the ethos of the setting

Yes what I gain at work is practise... What I gain from the university is theory and...they are both related but at the same time when you learn it at university you go to work and that's helping you to look for it...how that theory that you learnt, to put it into practice...while before, you just go to work you don't really think about it

## CONCEPTION 4: ACCESS TO A WIDE RANGE OF RESOURCES

I research... everything..... If I go to a meeting or to a conference or seminar ... I use that to gain knowledge towards my study. Professional discussions... I use that kind of thing as well

.... I think you get to a certain stage of learning at work and you can't go any further because the people at work don't have the knowledge to give you and being at university shows you where to look for that next stage of learning and inspires you to look for more

...taking feedback from like Ofsted whereas I wouldn't ...maybe wouldn't have looked at it quite as closely and take that in or appraisals and suddenly it's like....it's not just some writing in front of me...it's something like, what can I do with that? Where can I take that now? Develop it from there

# CONCEPTION 5: LEARNING THAT MAKES YOU REFLECT ON AND REVIEW YOUR PRACTICE

I think going back and revisiting some of the things...sometimes I think you get so used to them ... you do them as second nature...you don't actually look to see if they are working...why do we use them? Why were they put in place? And actually are they any good? Or we're using them just because they've been there since day one, is that why they use them...why are we doing that?

it makes me think more on a day to day basis of what I'm doing...why am I doing this? And how can I improve on what I am doing and to also realise that sometimes your practice might not be that. It's quite what you think it is and by reviewing that you can improve

And no matter what sector you are at,... looking for critical incidents and reflect on experience all the time. ...it's at the back of your head. I have to think about it...yes I did this but I can do it differently next time. A lot of things we do every day and we don't really think on them. Well, if I didn't do this course at the university I wouldn't think ...ah yes I have reflected on things and how I can do things differently, if I did something at work. And it's the terminology that we start to use. It's the clue to put the two together

# CONCEPTION 6: CHANGING AS A PERSON

I've learnt a lot about myself.... how much experience I have got ... sometimes I lack confidence in how much I know. So, being able to put it down on paper ....., I think it's given us the confidence to move forward, think I can do this....

For a long time I was feeling a bit disrespected, undervalued .. I feel as a person this has opened up a new window for me. I feel I'm a different person now in the workplace I'm looking for progression again ... I feel a lot more confident. Actually, doing the modules that I have done in the last year and just focussing on new research and feeling more knowledgeable I feel has just supported my confidence so much and has opened a window that there's a lot more out there.

The first time was when I did my APEL module and I was amazed at how much I did know and how much I put in... I was impressed with myself....I think sometimes .... you never realise how much you know until somebody else brings it out

# UWBL, CPD AND LL

These conceptions suggest that University Work Based Learning has potential to meet the developmental needs of the Early Years practitioners, equipping them with Lifelong Learning tools to continue enriching their practice and outcomes for the children and the communities they work within.

Due to the limited number of participants in the Conceptions study, more research needs to be conducted, perhaps comparing UWBL with other approaches to Early Years Practitioners professional development for Lifelong Learning.



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