

Theory into practice for Early Years professionals at Anglia Ruskin University

Here, **Geraldine Davis** describes developing programmes matched to workforce needs that allow students to translate theory into professional practice.



The Faculty of Education at Anglia Ruskin University has been working closely with Essex County Council and with a range of regional employers including schools and Early Years settings to ensure that the theory of educational practice translates into solutions for real issues of professional practice. In terms of employer engagement, the Faculty ensure it is outward looking by consulting extensively with its networks of schools; with key local authority stakeholders; with professionals already in the sector returning to study; with parents and the local communities including teachers and the children. The developments of the foundation degrees, BA degrees and a range of postgraduate programmes are based on collaboration with employers and other stakeholders.

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programme design and delivery by the University. Programmes cannot stand still as professional practice changes and develops. Students and employers have a say in the development and delivery of the modules, so that the programme meets their needs in relation to professional practice in diverse and changing Early Years settings. Involvement in workforce issues through close contact with professionals in practice helps University staff to discuss the opportunities for development of varying levels of programme and innovative types of provision (including foundation degrees, master's degrees with a practice focus, and modules for professional development). Matching the workforce need to the programme design requires considerable dialogue with practice partners; this includes discussion of the most suitable delivery patterns for the programme, whether full time, part time, on line, or by other forms of

distance learning. The ability to redevelop programmes to account for emergent Government policies is another example of flexibility and innovation.

One such innovation is the development of an MA in Early Years Professional Practice. This MA, directed at those working as Early Years Professionals, aims to increase practitioners' theoretical knowledge, and then apply the knowledge to their workplace settings. It encourages students to use their theoretical knowledge to develop new solutions to workplace problems and to use these to build up evidence-based initiatives in their workplace. For example, in the Leadership and Change module, students identify a change needed in their workplace setting, consider the theoretical approaches to leadership and change management, and then plan and implement a change using the theoretical stance they have developed.



The MA Early Years Professional Practice programme has been developed in collaboration with the local authority and with practitioners. The local authority recognises the need for strong leadership, and Early Years Professionals are given the opportunity to determine the way in which professional practice can improve. The aim is to establish a sustainable community of practice in the Essex region. It is expected that graduates will lead this community of practice in sharing their evidence-based workplace initiatives. Students on the MA are also part of a network of Early Years Professionals; meetings are hosted at the University to share good practice through this network.

In another example, through the Early Years Pedagogy module, Dr Paulette Luff promotes exploration of pedagogy in relation to Early Years settings. Students consider a variety of pedagogical approaches, develop their own philosophy of pedagogy and interpret this in relation to their

own workplace settings. Academics act as 'resources', offering support for projects, help for students to develop their ideas, and facilitating the development of links between theory and practice, but the students remain the 'experts' in relation to their own settings. It is the students who are the key players in develop-

ment of their practice. The aim is for graduates to be real innovators; this cannot be achieved unless students are given considerable autonomy within the postgraduate programme.

One pedagogical approach, developed by Sara Knight, is that of Forest School in which children work outdoors over time. Sara is a ►

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lecturer specialising in Outdoor Play and a Forest School practitioner and acts as a specialist resource to students on the MA. She has also developed an innovative curriculum across foundation and undergraduate degrees offering opportunities for learning outside the classroom.

Elizabeth Appleton, a student on the MA in Early Years Professional Practice, was awarded the prestigious TACTYC award: 'An Innovative Learning Journey', in November 2010. TACTYC (Training, Advancement and Co-operation in Teaching Young Children) is an Early Years organisation hosting an annual award that recognises the success of any member who demonstrates 'innovation, imagination or originality in stimulating learning for children, or practitioners'. Elizabeth works as a Sure Start Children's Centre Teacher in Colchester. She and her colleague, Carol Middleton, use 'Forest School' to support children's transition into school. They engage children in outdoors activities over a period of time, building confidence in the children at the point when they move into school, a transition that can lead to low self-esteem and children struggling with tasks at which they were once proficient. The Forest School projects run by Elizabeth and Carol aim to build children's resilience and the children seem to engage more readily in communication and develop a

greater sense of self-confidence though this initiative. Elizabeth is able to share her experience of the Forest School projects with peers on the MA, to help them establish their own initiatives in their respective workplaces.

Elizabeth and Carol received their award in November at the TACTYC conference in Birmingham. Elizabeth said:

The project has highlighted the importance of children leading their own learning in rich, natural environments. The teachers are telling us that children involved are more confident and able to participate fully in classroom activities. We are now piloting training with the practitioners in order that they understand the theory and pedagogy and can connect it with what they see the children doing when they play. This links right into the professional practice aspect of the MA.

Education plays a powerful role in transforming lives. At Anglia Ruskin University, academics work together with professionals in practice settings to engage with innovative projects, so that learning has an impact on improving that practice.

For more information on the MA Early Years Professional Practice delivered at the Chelmsford campus, please contact Geraldine Davis at: geraldine.davis@anglia.ac.uk.

To find out details of the TACTYC award go to www.tactyc.org.uk; for more about this project, please contact Elizabeth Appleton at: elizabeth.appleton@live.co.uk.



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Dr Geraldine Davis is an academic with a strong interest in professional learning for education and health practitioners. The use of informal and formal learning, linking theoretical perspectives and work based experiences, and reflecting on professional practice are all aspects developed through the modules, programmes and research projects Geraldine leads.