Circles of Change: Innovative approaches to field education

Griffith University staff recently made significant changes to the way its BHS/BE (CFS/P) programs are taught. These changes were initiated by university staff concerned about future practitioners’ preparation for work in the field (particularly in regard to the quality of their practicum experience with infants and toddlers). These concerns were supported by local childcare directors who were disappointed that graduates didn’t have the same interest in working with toddlers and infants as they did with preschool-age children. These directors approached the university asking for suggestions about what could make a difference to the field, and to the lives of young children.

CIRCLES OF CHANGE

The authors decided to place university students in childcare centres in fours: two for the infant and toddler rooms. The four students, two/three practitioners and a university facilitator participated in Circles of Change three times during the four week field education experience. These Circles of Change provided periods of reflection and also served as a way of debriefing and microteaching during field education.

The ‘Circles of Change’ were self-managed learning groups built on the fundamental principles of adult learning which encourage and support critical reflection on what we think we already know. They also served as a way for students to form new understandings with regard to important issues.

The overriding approach to the Circles of Change was ‘democracy in action’ in its truest sense; the learning circles encouraged all views to be expressed and explored. The process of discussion and reflection generated new knowledge for the undergraduate students and the experience empowered them to act on the basis of this new knowledge.

VALUES OF SELF-EVALUATION AND REFLECTION

Undergraduate students were encouraged to become critically reflective in order to evaluate both their own practice and that of others in the human services sector, particularly in childcare centres. Reflection was a means by which students could continue to develop their knowledge, important practical skills and engagement in their professional development.

There were many benefits for all involved. Students supported each other during placement, worked collaboratively and often planned experiences together. They did not experience the isolation resulting from individual settings. The process made students feel like they were a member of a community of professionals committed to quality practice with children and their families.

For the university, the approach improved systemic practice in a number of ways:
- As students were placed in fours, less practicum placements were required.
- Funds usually allocated for visiting university staff were available to pay for the release of centre staff.
- Childcare centre directors also praised the program:
  - ‘This process is for the future. It gave me some confidence about people coming into the field.’
  - ‘One of the spin-offs for me as director of a childcare centre was how the initiative contributed to the professional development of the centre staff.’

CONCLUSION

It is important to encourage continued learning and to alleviate fragmentation of the field. We want to improve scholarship and practice. The changes to the programs challenged us to ‘think otherwise’ (Foucault, 1984) about how early childhood practitioners might be prepared for the field.

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Reference