

In relation to students I will ...

This is the time of year when students studying a wide variety of pre-service early childhood education courses are out in the early childhood field on placement. For some, such as first years, it may only be the first or second time they have been placed in an early childhood education and care setting.

This past year I have had the opportunity to spend a significant period of time with first-year university students as they navigate their way into tertiary studies. While most are school leavers, some are not, having returned to tertiary studies often a long time after leaving school and as such each cohort experiences challenges, frustrations and successes in different ways.

Going on placement after spending time in the cocoon that is the classroom can be met with fear, trepidation and anxiety but mostly it is excitement. Excited at the chance to get out among our youngest citizens and put into practice what they have learnt, try out some new ideas and be treated as a para-professional. Excited to learn from educators who, day-in and day-out, provide care and education programs for young children that are underpinned by excellent pedagogical practice and sound philosophies and beliefs. Except often this is not their experience.

The conversations, reflections and observations that students have provided to me about their placement experiences have caused me to consider whether students should be placed in services that have received a 'Significant Improvement Required' or a 'Working Towards' *National Quality Standard* assessment within the assessment and ratings process.

When students are placed in care and education services that are not able to provide high-quality examples of professionalism, pedagogy and curriculum and leadership, we risk reinforcing maladaptive practices that in time may be difficult to shift or result in students becoming so disillusioned that they leave the profession before they have started.

Having an early childhood student in a service is a lot of work, or at least it should be. They require supervision, mentoring, teaching and support. When you also consider that some of these students are still adolescents, we are required to remember that they are still in a developmental stage. It is useful to consider that adolescence is a period of *preparation* for adulthood.

The World Health Organization states that key developmental milestones occur during this time, notably 'development of identity, the acquisition of skills needed to carry out adult relationships and roles, and the capacity for abstract reasoning' (WHO, 2015). With this in mind, it is imperative that students are placed in early learning environments that have capacity to support them appropriately and consistently and that this support is provided by highly skilled early childhood professionals.

One student recently said to me that despite making many attempts, using the strategies I had given her, to set up a time for her and her mentor educator to go through the academic requirements of the

placement, she had been told that they did not have the time and they did not have to show her how they planned their program or designed their curriculum. She was told that her role was to be with the children and help the staff out. After trying to provide her with as many strength-based approaches I could think of, I had run out of ideas.

Two services I know, who regularly accept student placements and who have received ratings of 'Exceeding' the *National Quality Standard*, recently told me that they have not taken any students this year as they had two new graduates they were trying to mentor and support. They view the commitment to taking a student as a significant investment on their part, and would only do this when they were able to provide the student with the appropriate level of support. They imagined they would re-engage later in 2016 when they were able to provide this support.

It is difficult to place students. Ask any placement coordinator at any tertiary institution and they will tell you this is so. With the wide proliferation of Registered Training Organisations trying to place Certificate III students for anything upwards of 120 hours of practical experience, this means that competition for these coveted placements is fierce.

Recently in class we have been reflecting on the Early Childhood Australia *Code of Ethics* and in particular section V—'In relation to students I will' (ECA, 2006).

'... it is imperative that students are placed in early learning environments that have capacity to support them appropriately and consistently.'



The 2015 revised draft of the *Code of Ethics*, in their commitments to action, has students now placed in the 'In relation to the profession I will':

'Welcome students as aspiring professionals, model quality practice and provide constructive feedback and assessment' (ECA, *Draft revised Code of Ethics*, 2015).

This is very good! It recognises students as being members of our profession—neophyte in type, but members nonetheless—and as such supports the notion that students have professional knowledge and skills that need to be respected and developed.

The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority publishes ratings and assessment results in part to provide transparency and accountability and also to help parents assess the quality of care and education services that are available. Perhaps it is time to use these ratings to be judicious in where we decide to place the next generation of early childhood educators during their vital placement experiences.

I know that some institutions are already conducting a check of the national registers to determine service ratings before they approach services for student placements, but the push on places, particularly for certificate and diploma courses, means that others are most likely not.

Students are not an extra pair of hands and they deserve to be placed in a professional context that results in them feeling enthusiastic, valued and supported.

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References

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