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Title Teaching assistants as educational community-based advocates.
Session Transforming lives transforming places: Foundation degrees and their impact on mature female learners and their communities. (Bovill)
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Context

The *Transforming Lives* research centres on TA FdA graduates at three English universities. Extended semi-structured Skype or telephone interviews with 21 participants provided data concerning their HE experiences. One notable strand in this data highlights the impact of the participants' reflective and pedagogical HE learning on their practice with children, within which an emerging theme was that of participants' changing view of the child. Participants experienced a shift in their perception of children, from being recipients of a linear and decontextualized curriculum, to a more nuanced, holistic and rights-based perception of children as active participants in their learning and in the wider world (UNICEF).

The role and professional development processes for TAs in the UK remains unstructured (Batchford et al 2012) and consequently, their professional terms vary regarding pay, responsibility and qualifications (Emira 2011: 163). From 2000, the UK higher education (HE) sector involved in education programmes responded to this complexity with Foundation degrees (FdAs), programmes designed for students employed in their field of study. The student body of TA FdAs continually represents elements of widening participation, being largely female, mature and from non-traditional HE backgrounds (Bovill 2012 and Dunne et al 2009).

Theoretical approach

A significant beneficial outcome for TA FdA graduates is that of increased professional confidence in supporting children's learning, with students connecting this to a greater understanding of learning theory and research (Edmond 2010;

Morris 2010). Watson et al (2013) further note that these students should be seen as a marginalised group in education being largely female, with low qualifications and poor pay. Alongside such factors, they often work with children who have the most needs in a classroom (Rubie et al 2010).

Archer's (2008) consideration of reflexivity addresses modes of internal dialogue exploring an individual's actions and concerns. Bovill (2012) utilised Archer's reflexivity and identified that TA FdA students see their HE participation partly as a means *'to 'give back' to existing social circumstances, model to offspring, or simply prove to themselves their own capability and increase self-belief'* (Bovill 2012: 688). These mature non-traditional students demonstrated a tendency to engage in one of two forms of reflexivity; communicative or meta-reflexivity. Communicative reflexives often remain connected to their social context, experience an 'empirical tendency' toward social immobility and have a strong dedication to family and community well-being. Meta-reflexives are highly committed to vocational improvement with a view to social transformation. Bovill further finds that these graduates *'choose to remain actively embedded in their social contexts'*, and *'prioritise their investments in their families, their communities and their social networks'* (2012: 697).

Given that many graduates grow in confidence following HE study and tend to remain in their social contexts, their view of children and of their own associated pedagogical choices is worthy of scrutiny. The Vygotskian (1978) notion of co-construction as a basis for those educating young children can be employed to support this analysis. Vygotsky's assertion of a capable child alongside a supportive adult is practiced by the respected preschools of Reggio Emilia (Malaguzzi 1998 and Rinaldi 2006) and offers a pedagogical value base where adults see themselves as *more knowledgeable others*, whilst also recognising the competence of children as social beings, adept at creating, learning and communicating.

This paper will draw together these three elements of increased confidence, reflexivity and a positive view of the child to place these non-traditional HE students as school-based community change agents.

Findings

Participants indicated that the FdA had opened their eyes to the multifaceted nature of learning, altering their perspective on children as learners. They noted a heightened awareness of the possibilities within a life-long trajectory for learning and participation for all children, taking a view that current UK assessment practice could be seen to be limiting with regards to a child's potential (Hart et al 2004).

These shifts in thinking are aligned to three themes.

1. *Recognising underlying theory in educational practice*

Participants cited their increased knowledge of educational research and theory as furnishing them with valuable understanding of how children learn. One participant commented that, *'It made me realise why we do what we do.'* There was a prevalent view that practicing evaluative and reflective skills led them to a deeper understanding of the purpose of learning, an increased appreciation of each child's unique qualities and greater resourcefulness in their role in overcoming barriers to learning.

2. *Challenging their own and others' assumptions*

During their studies participants encountered discourses that challenged their existing values and beliefs which led them to acknowledge their own and others' prejudices but also foregrounded aspects of their views on children. A recurrent interview response was that of recognising the negative impact of labelling children on ability (Dweck 2010). Participants referred to having previously taken an unquestioning view of the target-driven nature of education but now recognised its limitations and had changed their practice, where possible, to have less of a focus on externally defined outcomes.

3. *A transformed view of achievement and aspiration for children*

As participants' understanding of children's individuality developed, so had their recognition of the narrow limitations of attainment levels. They adapted their practice to support each child to experience success, in whatever way was appropriate for them as in individual: *'everyone can achieve...anything. It's just about changing the way you work with a child.'* There was also a strong discourse of participants being

aspirational for children over an adaptive timescale: *'children can often achieve more than they think they can. They might not achieve it today but they might achieve it next week...'*

Participants' increased confidence to act on these new perspectives and put many of their newfound ideas into practice in the classroom of their home communities, suggests the potential of TA FdA graduates to be educational advocate for children and for the promotion of an holistic approach to learning.