**They really are Change Agents: The Impact Early Years Initial Teacher Trainees have on Practice**

Introduced by Debra Laxton (Early Childhood Lead and EYITT coordinator, University of Chichester)

Last year was another successful year for the University of Chichester’s Early Years Initial Teacher Training (EYITT) programme. Seven trainees on the graduate employment based route provide their reflections on the impact of the programme to both themselves and their setting communities. Their stories demonstrate that the decision to make EYITT available to all graduates, even those with limited experience, is fair and that it is a person’s ability and motivation to learn, lead and inspire that makes the difference.

*Christopher Deller*

The biggest impact of attending the Early Years Initial Teacher Training Programme for me was the course’s ability to question what it really means to educate and how our actions as educators influence the children that we teach. Having previously studied and worked in primary education, I felt I started the course with a very academic understanding of education. This caused me to overestimate the emotional capacity of children and misinterpret their over-stimulation or frustration as an act of disobedience. Learning how children develop emotionally and how to support emotional literacy has not only changed my own perception of what it means to educate, but also allowed me to share this knowledge with others. I had noticed that at times practitioners faced with challenging behaviour, and a lack of knowledge and understanding, sometimes resorted to inappropriate strategies rooted in discipline as I had once done. After sharing my knowledge with colleagues, they seemed relieved to realise that disciplinary measures do not work beyond teaching children the belief that they should be subservient. Staff were empowered to change their practice and help children understand their own emotions and the emotions of others which supported children in managing their feelings and naturally promoted positive behaviour. This in turn increased the level of wellbeing for both children and practitioners.

*Chloe Strickland*

The Early Years Initial Teacher Training programme enabled me to reflect on my practice and make several positive changes in my setting. My previous studies had led me to research children’s play and other aspects of children’s development, but it was whilst working towards EYTS that I began to consider other fundamental aspects of early childhood education. Following a university training session around attachment and the key person I was motivated to find out more on the subject. I found that the role of the Key Person is often underestimated and misunderstood by some practitioners who focus primarily on paperwork and ratios. An increased awareness led to the most significant changes of both my own practice and the setting provision. I led a staff training session that included discussions around attachment theories, the roles of the Key Person, legislative requirements and government initiatives. As a result of this training, an action plan was drawn up and agreed collaboratively by the staff team. This meant that implementation was straightforward; we had a shared vision with clear, achievable goals. The plan enabled us to develop a more effective Key Person approach for children based on emotional needs and providing a successful triangle of care between parent and key person for each child. We have already seen the impact of change as children have settled into the setting more easily this academic year benefitting from an ethos of building and fostering positive relationships with both parents and children.

*Sarah Froggatt*

Before applying for the EYITT programme I had little experience of childcare and education but had a strong passion both for learning and working with children to help them grow and develop. I was pleased to be accepted onto the course and from day one, my knowledge and confidence started to grow which was reflected in my practice development. The more I learnt, through the university sessions and research I was doing, the more I wanted to share my knowledge and experiences with my team. Although I was still one of the newest practitioners to the setting, the team and setting owners understood the expectations of the EYITT programme which meant changes that might not normally have been considered were accepted. One example was my reflection and subsequent feedback on the outside learning environment. This led to an extension of the nursery; an outside classroom was built and our garden received a long-awaited make over. Seeing the impact these changes had on the children, watching them play, learn and enjoy their new environment felt amazing. It also supported my manager in being more open to change and ‘giving things a go’.

*Gillian Jones*

Undertaking Early Years Initial Teacher Training has led to both a personal and professional journey. After working in early years for over twenty years I was a little complacent about what I might learn, expecting only to deepen and consolidate my knowledge. How wrong I was! The programme and placements have led me to reflect on my practice, leading me to consistently consider how to provide children with the richest educational experiences. I have become a confident practitioner, discovering a passion for child-led learning and the use of nature and natural resources both in the indoor and outdoor environments. These passions have been translated into practice and shared with staff via meetings, training and modelling. The impact on my setting has been significant. We have worked collaboratively to revise how we work, in order to place a higher educational value on play. Staff now support children effectively in their play, using children’s fascinations to progress learning and by understanding the educational outcomes afforded by the ‘process’ rather than an end result or ‘product’. An example of this learning was seen recently when a child’s interest in fairies and elves was observed and a fairy door subsequently ‘arrived’ in the preschool garden. This prop enabled learning to span the course of two weeks and saw children use mark making (writing fairy notes), mathematical concepts (size, counting), critical thought, problem solving, literacy and communication and language. My setting have also been able to use part of the programme funding to enhance our outdoor provision. Combining my enthusiasm for nature and natural resources, I was able to replace some of our plastic resources with wooden equivalents. I was also able to develop the outdoor area to include specific learning areas by means of a mud kitchen, literacy den, growing area and mini beast space.

*Emma Merriott*

It is hard to narrow down the impact of the EYITT programme but I think the most profound difference for me is my expectations of children. As I came to realise (helped by the additional school and non-host placements) how capable children are, how much they understand and can achieve so my expectations of children rose. The non-host placement using an ‘in the moment’ planning style helped to increase my awareness of children's ability to extend their own knowledge when exposed to appropriate experiences and resources with responsive, knowledgeable adults. Initially, I found I was naturally giving children greater responsibility and better promoting their independence and resilience which was reflected in the progress they made. This filtered through to other staff, as I sensitively challenged them on limiting children's experiences and having low expectations. This led to whole staff reflection on how we plan and our provision as some staff were more focussed on the end product rather than the child’s experience and process. This meant that children's own motives and ideas were not always given the recognition and value they should. I now have much higher yet realistic expectations of children and this is developing through the staff team. This is an area for continuing development but the impact is already evident in individual children's progress.

*Stephen Peeling*

Before starting the EYITT programme, I felt like an outsider in terms of being a professional in the early years sector. I had not been working in education for long and had only recently moved into the early years. I had become aware of a perception of a gap between ‘proper teachers’ and those who ‘only work with children’. Those who are helping children to develop and those who are simply ‘good with kids’. I was initially attracted to the course as I hoped it would add the all-important word ‘teacher’ to my name and allow me to join the first group. I hoped to gain recognition and status as a professional to add to my natural ability and love of working with children. By the time the first lecture was over, my perceptions of what an early years teacher was were shattered. I had thought of it as something official and exclusive for people highly informed on a specific subject who didactically hand out information. Instead, I had a new understanding of what teaching was; ‘the many different ways in which adults help young children learn’ (Ofsted, 2015). I instantly recognised myself in this role. The programme went on to provide a solid base of knowledge and understanding that injected a new level of self-confidence. Over the year, I was empowered to assess and improve my practice. Changes such as the implementation of less contrived planning, a smoother observation, assessment and planning cycle, and a full appreciation of the key person/child relationship were all made possible by the liberating acceptance of the value of my work. I now find myself hooked and endlessly curious about early education and ways to improve the opportunities and outcomes of the children I work with. Since the course finished I have gained an exciting post as an Early Years Teacher. My initial hopes to be seen as a professional did pan out in the end but regardless of status the important thing was that I was inspired to recognise myself as a teacher from the start and then learnt how to become competent in the role.

*Natasha Young*

I have always believed my job was important, but before embarking on the EYITT programme I often considered my role in isolation, in terms of my impact on each individual child I taught. As the course progressed, I became much more aware of the wider context in which I was working and the different influences on the early years sector; the government’s political and economic agenda, parents’ need for affordable childcare and the need for early years settings to remain financially viable. I realised how important it is not to let these demands obscure the genuine needs of the child. Like all nurseries, my setting has faced considerable challenges in recent years. The introduction of the free entitlement has probably had the greatest impact and EYITT gave me the confidence to engage fully with these debates. We wanted to remain as flexible as possible for parents, whilst still covering our costs. In order to do so, we have lowered the age we accept children into the nursery. We have had to re-evaluate our provision to ensure we meet the needs of these younger children, without compromising our core values of working with mixed aged groups and using the outdoors as much as possible.

Coming together with other trainees on the university training days was a great opportunity to share knowledge and ideas with like-minded professionals. The themes raised, both as part of the course syllabus and in general conversation, prompted debate back in my host setting. I gained insights into issues such as the Prevent Duty that I would not otherwise have questioned, and suggested to colleagues that we should actually be promoting ‘Universal’ rather than purely ‘British’ values.

As a direct result of the course, my colleagues and I have become much more reflective as a team and have implemented many changes. The most significant of these would be our key person approach; small changes such as eating meals in more intimate key groups are combining to create much stronger attachments between children and their key person. This is an ongoing process, but we are already seeing very positive results.