

Initial findings

How useful is Early Years Teacher training and what difference does it make to leading practice? **Samantha Sutton-Tsang**, senior lecturer from the Department for Children and Families at the University of Worcester, did some research on the subject

Early Years Teacher training is often in the news for the wrong reasons – numbers have dwindled steadily since its introduction in 2014, with just 365 starting in 2018-19 (the initial target was 2,400 per year). But it is still a way of gaining Government-funded training at a graduate level in the early years – and we all know the difference that graduate-led practice can make.

I was appointed programme leader for Early Years Initial Teacher Training in 2016 and it became apparent very early on that trainees faced significant challenges both during and after their training. We know that trainees often feel undervalued as Early Years Teachers (EYTs), and some settings and schools appeared to have misconceptions about them.

I wanted to gather evidence of the challenges that the trainees faced in practice which correlated with the literature that I had read about professional identity and the lack of understanding of the role of the EYT in mainstream education. My data is based on the eight trainees



who completed the programme at the University of Worcester out of the 14 who started in 2017-2018. In common with some other universities, Worcester is no longer offering the EYITT course.

The Graduate Entry (GE) route appeals particularly to career changers interested in making a

difference to the early years, or to align with family life and change in employment or interests. The four trainees on this route were from a range of backgrounds – a librarian, a solicitor, one with a medical research background and a part-time early years worker who left her job to study. The Graduate Employment Based (GEB) trainees were teaching assistants in schools and early years practitioners in PVI settings, one of whom had recently switched jobs from being a chef. Although very different, each trainee brought a range of perspectives to the programme and enriched the discussions we had.

case study: Bethany Tibbetts



An experienced early years practitioner, who completed the Graduate Employment Based route.

Bethany has worked in a range of settings over five years and has a Level 3 qualification and a degree. She wanted to develop her understanding of the early years to enhance her skills and knowledge within her existing role as a Learning Support Practitioner (Early Years) in a maintained school.

She says, 'The programme has developed my confidence. It has enabled me to justify my practice through a range of pedagogies that support children's unique learning styles best.

'I have become more knowledgeable and this shines through to the activities I plan which hook and engage children in their learning and development [this was commented upon in her mentor's final impact statement]. Professional discussion which inspires change within the setting has also taken place because of this.'

During the training, Bethany found it hard to balance work and training alongside study for the other element of the programme, the Postgraduate Certificate in Leading Early Years Practice, and family life.

This has improved her time management skills, she adds.

FINDINGS

All trainees achieved similar outcomes by the end of the programme, with those on both the GE and GEB routes achieving outstanding grades in the assessed Teachers' Standards (Early Years). All eight trainees felt that the programme had had a positive impact on their confidence, professionalism and practice. ➤

Crucially, they felt they better understood how learning and development can be supported using a range of theories and international perspectives.

According to one Graduate Entry trainee's final impact statement, a system of introducing storytelling and craft activities with parents helped her to 'break down the barriers' of communication, while parental feedback also reflected this. A GEB trainee identified that she now knew when to 'stand back' and adopt a 'listening pedagogy' and could identify 'purpose' to children's activities and interests, using the theoretical knowledge gained on the programme.

Another trainee said, 'The EYITT and postgraduate modules have enabled me to become an agent of change in my own setting. Where before I didn't really feel qualified, now I lead on planning, will deliver a lecture or a workshop and talk to other practitioners about new knowledge.'

Mentors said trainees created resources which have had a positive impact on child development and were proactive in providing parents with information on how they could recreate activities at home.

One mentor employed at a nursery said a trainee's 'quality of teaching is consistently of a good quality, inspirational and worthy of dissemination to other practitioners... even supporting students completing a Level 2 and 3 qualification.'

The requirement to visit a contrasting setting prompted one trainee to say their placement made her realise what a play-based curriculum really was. She said, 'I have the confidence to say that there's a better way of doing this, [while] still being respectful and not stepping on people's toes.'

A nursery manager said her

case study: Deborah Jones-Dee



A career changer who completed the Graduate Entry route.

As a customer advisor at the Hive library in Worcester, Deborah became involved in the early years events there, eventually leading on initiatives focused on children's involvement in the library. It was this that sparked her enthusiasm to learn more about the early years.

She says, 'I started as a career changer so my confidence was low at first, especially when other people in the group had worked in the early years for some time and really knew what they were talking about. It's hard not to compare yourself with others. But the course was well structured so that the GE students picked up lots of information and the knowledge required for us to get up to speed with the others. By the end of the course, I felt like I could 'hold my own' in discussions and contribute knowledgeably – this was true in both an academic setting and placements.'

Returning to her previous employer, Deborah took on the role as a library team

leader and is pursuing the MA in Early Childhood Studies at the University of Worcester following completion of the PGCert in Leading Early Years Practice alongside the EYITT training.

She says, 'My qualification as an EYT has given me the confidence to know how my early years experience and knowledge fit alongside my library experience. It really is an interesting and varied role which I thoroughly enjoy. My plans would be to work more specifically with young children in an educational or therapeutic setting, something I am hoping my MA studies will help me to realise. However, this does present challenges.

'And for those of us who have gained EYT Status, there appear to be few chances of gaining employment on the same financial footing as someone with QTS. It is disheartening to think that the qualification is not equally recognised professionally, socially or financially alongside other teaching qualifications.

'Despite this, I would not change what I have done. I am proud to be an EYT and hope to spend many years working in the early years sector.'

overall experience with Early Years Professionals and EYTs was that they 'provide strong leadership and are able to mentor and coach other staff/students/trainees... With such a well-qualified workforce, there is a culture of continuous improvement.'

I felt really pleased to see how trainees who had no previous experience had become such reflective practitioners who have gained an immense amount of knowledge and skill over a one-year training programme.

CHALLENGES

One GE trainee identified that where the class teacher didn't know anything about the EYITT

programme, they were either expected to complete the same level of practice as a trainee primary teacher or not given the right level of responsibility and opportunity to carry out the required tasks. This was addressed with support from tutors from the university.

All trainees understood that the qualification as an EYT did not automatically mean recognised status in line with other teacher training qualifications – pay and conditions remain below that of Qualified Teacher Status.

GEB trainees may be eligible for £7,000 to cover training fees, with an additional £7,000 employer incentive. But with many university fees reaching £9,250, this is effectively a shortfall of over £2,000 for the university. It's understandable that universities do not see the EYITT programme as viable when it requires the same high quality taught input and assessment, and similar staffing levels and expertise, as other teacher training courses.

Funding regulations make it challenging for individuals wishing to embark on an EYITT programme. Three of our six trainees who withdrew did so because they were unable to financially support themselves. ■

“ Pay and conditions remain below that of Qualified Teacher Status ”

EYITT trainees: Where are they now?

4 Graduate Employment Based (GEB) trainees:

- 1 TA in a school, recognised as an EYT, but not reflected in their pay. Hoping to pursue Master's-level study.
- 1 preschool leader in a nursery, not recognised in pay or status as an EYT. Hoping to pursue Master's-level study.
- 1 TA in a school, not recognised as an EYT.
- 1 learning support practitioner in a school.

4 Graduate Entry (GE) trainees:

- 1 employed and recognised as an EYT, but not reflected in their pay.
- 1 employed as a nursery practitioner (maternity cover).
- 1 employed as a library customer advisor and team leader. Hoping to pursue Master's-level study.
- 1 employed as a TA and learning support across phases in a school. Hoping to pursue Master's-level study.