It started with a blog: how international connections were made and sustained in a global pandemic

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It Started with a Blog: How International Connections were Made and Sustained in a Global Pandemic

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Abstract

In a desperate 2020 Covid-inspired pivot, the early childhood team at Victoria University, Melbourne, introduced remote placements for their early childhood teacher students. This was represented through RPEC @ VU (Remote Placements in Early Childhood at Victoria University), and when an online blog post about RPEC@VU reached Ireland, the VU team were contacted by the early childhood team at Dublin City University, who were similarly introducing remote placement for their students. On opposite sides of the world, each team working in isolation in their own country, these educators connected to share ideas, insights and inspiration. From the redesign of thinking and practice in response to the pandemic, unforeseen opportunities were generated. This paper presents a case study exploring the shared values that brought the early childhood teams from these two institutions together and that continue to sustain the partnership. A vibrant international collaboration continues to be built across the two institutions.

Keywords: remote placement, professional placement, practicum, early childhood teacher education, blog

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Introduction

This story about connections made across two continents started with a blog. The blog post (Scott, 2020) was produced by the early childhood education team of academics at Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne, Australia. It outlined their creation of a remote, or virtual, "Covid-safe" professional placement program for early childhood education students, in an attempt to circumvent the restrictions and challenges posed by Covid-19 in early 2020. The program was developed with the objective of ensuring students could connect with children and families, develop skills and knowledge to progress in their studies, and meet the course requirements, whilst face-to-face placements were unavailable. Other higher education institutions in Australia opted to cancel or postpone all placement. The post caught the attention of the early childhood team at Dublin City University (DCU) in Ireland, over 10,000 miles away. The blog post landed at a time when the DCU team was developing plans for remote placement amid uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Receiving the VU blog post seemed fortuitous, providing an opportunity to reach out and connect. So began the story of an international connection that set out to share experiences of reconfiguring placement programmes and combat professional isolation during a global pandemic.

The VU and DCU teams, which comprised two academics from each university, met online for the first time in September 2020. Our initial intention was to learn about remote placement with, and from, each other. However, over the period of the academic year, and through many conversations, our pedagogical insights deepened and our professional relationships grew, beyond the immediate area of placement. The international connection was strong and we began to wonder about the nature of the relationship and its foundations. The profiles of the academics involved were diverse in terms of age, experience, academic backgrounds and areas of expertise, but were similar in terms of gender and ethnicity. This article unpacks how the international connection between the four academics became so powerful in a relatively short space of time, detailing what the drivers were, beyond the shared experience of implementing a virtual placement program.

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) value international connections. Their motivation in promoting them is to "enhance research and knowledge capacity and to increase cultural understanding" (Altbach & Knight, 2007, p. 291) as well as "enhanc[ing] competitiveness, prestige and strategic alliances" (p. 293). Academics can also benefit from formal and informal international collaborations as the experience often raises greater awareness of emerging factors that may impact on

their professional practice and "without such awareness, professionals are blind to the changes affecting their societies and their own practice" (Bottery, 2006, p.106). The field of early childhood is changing rapidly and international collaborations offer opportunities to listen to and learn from each other, to see outside of ourselves and move beyond national perspectives. Although the opportunities arising from international connections extend to students as well as academics and HEIs, research has shown that the forces that support or hinder this work are not fully known (Cooper & Mitsunaga, 2010; Kahle et al.2018). While mutual respect and reciprocity, staying flexible, and maintaining regular contact are key to successful partnerships (Psaltis, 2007), international collaborations can present particular issues. Unanticipated cross-cultural challenges, struggles for power and control within the collaboration, rigidity in approaches to work, and imbalances in the relationship are all potential barriers to successful collaborations (Amey, Eddy & Ozaki, 2007). The four academics engaged in deep reflection on the nature of their relationship, recognising the benefits and challenges of engaging in international collaborations, and documented the elements that they saw as integral to this partnership.

This case study draws from the reflective narratives of four academics in response to the research question: 'how were international connections made and sustained in a global pandemic?' Through this research we have come to collaboratively trace and examine how and why the international connections were made, drawing on the context of placement and the impact of Covid-19. However, the focus of the paper goes beyond the practical programmatic issues of placement and seeks to present the implicit elements that have sustained, and continue to sustain, the professional relationship as a core element of the international connection.

The research takes the form of a case study (Stake, 1998), that is exploratory in nature and which examines the relationship between four academics at a particular point in time, as they share experiences of pivoting from a programme of traditional face-to-face placement to remote placement. It is rooted in narrative inquiry, that is, narrative as "meaning-making – the shaping or ordering of past experience" (Chase, 2008, p.64) and reflects an auto-ethnographic approach (Bosetti, Kawalilak & Patterson, 2008) whereby stories are shared and deeper understandings are constructed. It is therefore appropriate as part of the case study to draw on narrative inquiry to examine the connections and relationships that developed through peer-to-peer dialogue across the hemispheres. Reflection on the narratives will consider how the initial connection of reaching out to explore a reconceptualised form of placement evolved

and transformed over time, as part of the international collaboration between VU and DCU. What emerged through the research was the presence and importance of shared values amongst the four academics, which guided their work on placement, and which underpinned their relationship and sustained the international connection.

The article outlines how an international connection was made and flourished in the context of Covid-19. A brief overview will be given of how the global pandemic impacted professional placement programs offered by VU and DCU. The methodology section will frame the research processes. The remainder of the paper will explore the key values drawn from the data - those of social justice and solidarity, congruence and progressivism - that emerged from the participant reflections. The article will conclude with an assessment of the ways that values impact practice, relationships, and international connections.

The Context of the Global Covid-19 Pandemic

Covid-19 placed strict limitations on the ability of academics and students to connect with their teaching communities. It created an unfamiliar world that required maintaining a physical distance from families, friends and work colleagues. People were prevented from attending work-places and were required to work from home. For many, the world stopped, as many countries moved into strict lockdowns, forcing the closure of businesses and services. However, the world and work of HEIs did not stop across the globe. HEIs quickly transitioned to an online world. Academics became familiar with a variety of online software which supported real face-time communication. The software enabled the delivery of modules and maintained relationships with students and work colleagues. Whilst teaching online is not a new phenomenon in higher education, professional practicum added a layer of complexity for educational courses, including VU's and DCU's early childhood programmes. Professional practicum enables students to connect theory to practice, and to build their skills with a focus on establishing relationships with children, families and educators. It offers them real-life opportunities to develop their emerging teaching practice. During the first wave of Covid-19 all Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services in Ireland were closed down. Upon reopening in July of 2020, new restrictions were introduced, reducing the number of children and educators working in services. In Melbourne, Australia, many ECEC settings remained open, although with reduced numbers of children, and many were not accepting pre-service teachers for professional placements. These restrictions meant that addressing the issue of professional placement for students was becoming critical. Seeing challenges as opportunities, the two universities adopted new approaches to ad-

dress the issue of professional placement, resulting in the development of a unique remote placement experience for their students.

Reconfigured Professional Placement

Completion of professional placement is an essential component of ECEC qualifications in both countries. At VU, in order to meet accreditation by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, students in the Bachelor of Early Childhood undertake 80 days of placement across three years of the degree. The final placement supports students to meet the Graduate Teaching Standards in the areas of professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2019). Throughout the VU programme, students work with children aged from birth to five years and are required to undertake placement across a range of settings, including full-day child-care centres, sessional kindergarten (funded pre-school program) and in playgroups (informal short sessions where parents/carers stay with the child). Without successfully completing these placement days, students cannot graduate.

DCU also has a strong focus on professional placement, requiring students to complete a total of 144 days over four years in a range of settings including full-day (creche), sessional (pre-school, playgroup, Montessori) and policy (those settings which work on behalf of, but not directly with, young children and families). During the course of the programme students are required to work with children across the age range from birth to six years. Unlike Australia, there is no regulatory body in Ireland with which ECEC educators are required to register. However, the Department of Education and Skills [DES] (2019) stresses the importance of professional practice and requires at least 35% of all early childhood degree programmes be dedicated to professional placement.

Meeting the requirements set down by the regulatory body in Australia, and meeting the criteria of the DES in Ireland, was severely challenged when Covid-19 resulted in varying levels of restrictions in both countries through 2020 and into 2021. It became evident that a new approach to professional placements was needed. It appeared the predominant course of action for other HEIs in Australia and Ireland was to postpone students' professional placements, or provide alternative forms of assessment which did not require students to form relationships or connections with educators in early years settings, children or their families.

Relational pedagogy (Papatheodorou & Moyles, 2009) lies at the core of both the VU and DCU degree programmes and the teams strongly believed that failing to provide students with opportunities to make direct connections with professionals, children and their families would impact the integrity of their degrees. At the same time, they were motivated by the need to prioritise the health and well-being of their students, the children and the teachers in early childhood settings. The VU and DCU teams, unbeknown to each other, decided *not* to adopt the approach taken by other institutions in their countries, and instead chose to develop remote placement models which would ensure the safety of all, while still enabling students to connect with early childhood teachers, children and their families. In each country they stood out as the only institution to take this approach.

In Melbourne, early in the pandemic, the team at VU observed a reticence from other tertiary institutions, and from regulatory bodies, to commit to definitive action, or even advice, in the ever-changing and unprecedented times. The team felt an imperative to act with the best interests of children, students and the early childhood sector at heart, and so decided to take the initiative and develop a suite of experiences to offer students as a replacement for face-to-face professional placement. Called Remote Placement in Early Childhood (RPEC@VU), the program consisted of remote, virtual and "Covid-19 safe" ways of connecting students with children, families and early childhood professionals. This included opportunities for students to establish a relationship with a child and their family via Zoom and engage in learning experiences with them. As part of the program, students engaged with peers and a Bachelor-trained mentor teacher via Zoom to discuss their placement with the child and family, to receive support and guidance, and to develop skills and knowledge around how to engage with children and plan for their learning and development. Other aspects of the program included a virtual playgroup, where students worked with a Bachelor-trained mentor teacher to plan and implement a playgroup experience with groups of children over Zoom, and students having discussions with the parents of new babies to gain understanding of very young babies and the experience of becoming a parent.

The DCU team initiated their remote placement by enhancing students' digital skills and competencies, creating for the first time a digital literacy module which all students were required to complete. Students then moved onto the second stage of remote placement, which became known as digital pedagogy. Students were organised into groups of five to provide peer-to-peer support, and each cluster group was allocated a placement tutor who offered support and guidance

throughout the remote placement experience. Student groups were then connected to an early years setting where they worked collaboratively with educators, drawing on their digital skills to develop resources which the educators in the settings could use to enhance communication, pedagogy, curriculum and relationships between children, parents, and educators.

The DCU team also wanted to support final year students who had the option of taking up placement positions in policy settings. However, this was proving difficult, as many policy settings could not visualise what this placement might look like in reality. The DCU team were inspired when they came across the blog shared by VU, describing the way they had connected their students with families. The blog and the subsequent discussions with the VU team enabled DCU to develop concrete plans for final year students to work remotely with parents and children by establishing online parent and toddler groups. This proposal was put forward and accepted by policy services, family resource centres, libraries and other agencies who typically worked with DCU on student placement.

The DCU and VU teams offered students in both universities the opportunity to connect with each other and this they embraced. In Melbourne and Dublin, groups of students created introductory videos, sharing information about their student lives, providing details on their countries, giving a sense of the ECEC context along with detailing the content of their degree programmes. Having shared the videos, the groups of students then met remotely using zoom. VU students, who had already experienced remote placement, helped and inspired the DCU students as they developed plans for their remote parent and toddler groups. In April 2021, DCU students were invited to share their experience of working collaboratively with local agencies and with their peers in VU at a national conference hosted by Early Childhood Ireland.

Methodology

This article utilises aspects of a case study methodology using a story-telling, narrative approach proposed by Stake (1998) to explore the shared values inherent within this international connection, which led to the creation of a strong and enduring partnership. Descriptions of case study design and articulation vary, and the form the study takes reflects the epistemology of the researcher (Yazan, 2015). A case study can be both, or either, a method for investigation and an end result of research (Merriam, 2009). In this instance, the case study presented is an end product. Positioned within a social constructivist or interpretive research paradigm, this case study involves personal re-

lationships where the participant-researchers are intricately connected to, and in this instance actually comprise, the case. To be defined as interpretive research, Denzin and Lincoln (2008) state the research must embody the following characteristics: "a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings) and a naturalistic (set in the natural world) set of methodological procedures" (p. 42).

Originally brought together by sharing their experiences of creating innovative professional placement programs, the participants are four academics—two from Melbourne and two from Dublin. The data used to build the case study consists of the academics' extended reflective writing, email exchanges between the academics, notes on their conversations, and analysis of professional choices they made in the design of remote placements. There was no intention at the outset of the connection between the teams to document the connection in this way. Rather, as the partnership evolved, the connection solidified. The uniqueness and success of the partnership resulted in the researchers wanting to reflect on the conditions that brought this partnership to fruition. With a desire to analyse the conditions underpinning the partnership, the participants reflected on the creation and evolution of the partnership collectively and individually through returning to notes, emails and discussions to examine the process. Data in the form of extensive reflective writing was produced for the case study retrospectively. Guiding the development of this case was the research question: what were the drivers impacting this international partnership?

The data was afforded meaning by the participants through a process of individual and collective "reading and re-reading" (Stake, 1998, p. 73). In accordance with Stake's (1998) idea that analysis is essentially "taking something apart. We take our impressions, our observations, apart giving meaning to those parts" (p. 71), participants reflected on their personal motivation for designing the remote placement program, particularly given that this was not the direction taken by peers in other universities. Participants also considered what connected them to the others in the group, enabling them to work effectively with each other. These reflections were captured by personal narratives which were then used as a starting point for a deeper level of dialogue with all members of the group to try and draw out a rationale for their chosen approaches. The dialogue challenged members to go beyond the issue of placement and search for deeper understandings of the growing relationships that were developing, as Stake (1998) claims "by deep thinking, then understanding creeps forward" (p.73). The analysis of the data uncovered themes in the form of shared values. This case study presents the values

shared by the participants, those of social justice and solidarity, congruence, and progressivism, each illustrated by personal reflections. This exploration of values sheds light on how and why this international collaboration is successful, increasing understanding of how collective meaning-making and shared values are such powerful connectors.

Findings

The analysis of the narratives sought to answer the question: 'how were international connections made and sustained in a global pandemic?' The reflections and narratives resulting from the analysis unearthed core values shared between the academics, which emerged through the findings as both consistent and significant. The findings highlight that the values were not limited to one action (the reconfiguration of professional placement), though this was what brought the connection about in the first place, but are embedded in, and inform, every aspect of the participants' teaching and practice. These values became evident through the reflections and discussions between the four academics and are seen as presenting possible reasons for the development and sustenance of the connection. As one academic noted:

> *it was astounding the way in which the DCU and VU teams shared such similar experiences, challenges and passions. The synergies just kept popping up throughout our conversations.* (AA1)

As discussions around the narratives progressed, the core values were named with three standing out as common to all members: solidarity and social justice, congruence, and progressivism.

Solidarity and social justice

When considering why they had taken the decision to connect students with educators, children and families, the findings note how the academics began to see that remote placement could support not only students, but also the wider community, including children, families, educators, and the sector more generally, during Covid-19 lockdowns. Remote placement became more than ensuring students completed their degree programme - it also provided academics with an opportunity to integrate social justice into the placement experience:

> *We learnt that many parents were struggling: they were working from home, their children were learning from home, and their childcare was closed. It was the toddler who was missing out. For me a big motivator in this was the feeling I might actually be making someone's life easier.* (AA2)

Evident in the findings was the importance of promoting solidarity to achieve social justice by connecting students, children, families and

communities in the hope they would support each other as they strove against the negative impacts of the pandemic. Solidarity between academics is also recognised as academics note the benefits of working together, sharing experiences, rather than in isolation. The main challenge experienced by both teams as they reconfigured placement was the sense of isolation and how this resulted in the academics beginning to doubt their decisions:

> *For the first time I began to doubt myself…had I got it wrong…the fear of failure suddenly crept in, what if all this went wrong.* (IA1)

One of the main benefits of making the international connection noted by the academics was the sense of relief to know they were not alone:

> *Connecting with VU in the early days gave me hope, a safety blanket, that someone else was forging ahead and had experience of what we were planning.* (IA2)

When reflecting on the reasons for promoting the establishment of an international collaboration between the students, social justice again is noted as a driving factor:

> *I hope that being part of an international community of practice will empower them [students] to act as strong agents for the welfare of children the world over.* (AA2)

One academic noted a challenge experienced with designing remote placement was the lack of connection with *"like-minded people who are positive and have a solution-focused approach".* They noted how it was impacting on their ability to progress. The connection enabled the academics to engage in discussion which presented different perspectives, as one academic noted:

> *Sometimes it is only in working with likeminded people that ones' own horizon is broadened.* (IA2)

Congruence

Congruence is a value that was identified in the narratives as significant and is reflected in the design of both teams' reconfiguration of placement. Reflections on the narratives highlight a strong sense of a duty of care towards students as a motivating factor from all participants. The VU and DCU teams both note that their reimagined placement programs were not essential, they were not mandated by higher authorities. Rather, they were a solution proposed by teams wanting to take action and pursue positive outcomes in the best interests of

their students, children, families and communities in a difficult time. Irish academics recounted how they went against the advice from the government to place students in services,

> *I did not want to put our students in positions that would force them to take risks in relation to their own health and the health of their families.* (IA1)

Due to the lack of guidance coming from government, the Australian academics took the lead and made decisions in the best interest of their students to ensure they would graduate. In Ireland and Australia, the majority of HEIs adopted a wait and see approach and decided to postpone professional practicum. Pushing the problem down the road was not, in the opinion of one academic, the solution:

> *I did not want our students to have the experience of lack of clarity, the uncertainty and the stress.* (IA1)

As each team reconfigured placement, a strong emphasis was placed on putting supports in place for students to reduce the isolation of a remote working environment. In DCU, small communities of practice were set up for students with a placement tutor. They met every two weeks to listen to, and guide, students as they developed digital resources or plans to connect with parent and toddler groups and families, grounding them, and reminding them of the value of their work at that time, even as they faced challenges. At VU, students were cared for and nurtured through weekly Zoom sessions with mentor teachers who guided their practice, but also provided emotional support and social connection during what was a stressful and isolating time.

The support the academics provided to the students was mirrored in the design of remote placement where students were offered the opportunity to support educators, children and families through the development of digital resources, establishing online parent and toddler groups, play groups and working directly with families and children.

Progressivism

The VU academics noted in their reflections how the lack of guidance or direction motivated them to stop waiting, take the initiative, and make decisions:

> *We waited for guidance and direction from the Department and from regulating bodies. None was forthcoming and someone said 'we have to stop beating our head against the wall' and that was enough impetus for us to make some decisions.* (AA 1)

The findings indicate that the academics were acutely aware they had no roadmap to guide them or their students. The issue of risk is strongly highlighted and stated repeatedly in each narrative, especially the willingness to take risks:

> *Capacity and willingness to take risks and leading the way'* (IA2); *The project needed students and staff that were not risk averse (IA1); we … took a chance (AA1)*

The DCU team acknowledged the universal support across the School, Faculty and University for the team to take risks, and the Melbourne team knew that the proposal "*would be institutionally supported with management enthusiastically supporting their willingness to have a go and take a risk*"(AA1).

Discussion

The aim of this article was to explore the factors that supported the establishment and sustainability of an international connection during a global pandemic. The initial connection point for the teams at VU and DCU was the shared experience of reconfiguring early childhood professional practice, a simple blog post bringing them together. Organically, the connections grew and strengthened, initially retaining the focus on the experience of offering remote professional placement, then uncovering further shared experiences and values.

Findings indicate that shared values were the quiet driving force that sustained and enabled the development of this international collaboration. Stopping to reflect on what brought these four academics together enabled the team to draw out and make their values explicit. Values are simply a normal part of life (Gannerud & Rönnerman, 2006) that are communicated unknowingly, but are rarely discussed or made explicit (Hansen, Jensen & Broström, 2018). Values can be considered as concepts or principles (of the mind) but for this research, a more holistic understanding is embraced, which suggests that values are "principles and fundamental convictions which act as general guides to behaviour" (Halstead & Taylor, 2000, p. 169). Values are both implicit and explicit, and in the context of Covid-19 the values of the DCU and VU teams were called out and tested. Shared values supported trusting relationships to evolve, enabling collaborative learning through the creation of a 'social learning space' (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner,2020, p 15). Upon the identification of the three core shared values, the VU and DCU teams engaged in a deeper level of discussion, engaging with literature to interrogate these values in order to ascertain how they supported the creation, and enabled the sustainability, of the international connection.

The first shared values to become explicit were those under the umbrella of social justice. It was evident in the structure and processes of reworking professional placement due to Covid-19 that both teams were driven by values relating to a commitment to social justice. Embedded in this was also the idea that these values were those that we wished to see in our students; out of this the shared value of congruence emerged. The ability to pursue these alternative models, to take the risk and offer innovative and unique solutions, was enabled by a third value of progressivism, embodied and encouraged by both DCU and VU institutionally. These shared values are discussed below, and their implications for the research are untangled and analysed.

The desire to move forward, to take action, in part to serve and benefit others, resulted in the shared values of solidarity and social justice being prominent in the narrative reflections. These values pushed the teams to consider how professional placement might move beyond an important learning experience for students to also support isolated families and children who were starved of pedagogical as well as social connections. Ricard (2018) discusses the negative impact on the psychological well-being and physical health of people who experience a lack of connection. Providing support to children and families generated a sense of solidarity, as both teams identified more strongly with their students, the profession, and the community. Covid-19 effectively became a levelling influence, heightening needs, and the requirement for a collective response.

When the DCU and VU teaching teams linked, another layer of solidarity was formed. This can be identified as organic and consensual, "based on choice and non-exclusivity" (Reedy, 2003, p. 6). It moved the academics into a deeper understanding of the nature and role of solidarity. Freire's *Pedagogy of Solidarity* (Freire, Araujo, de Oliviera & Giroux, 2014) emerges from a concern with oppression by the market economy. In 2020 we can re-orientate his thinking to oppression by the fear of illness and the consequent fear of social connection. Freire et al. (2014) link together a number of concepts to explore the nature of solidarity as experienced by teachers and learners. Autonomy, empowerment and professional identity are intertwined to develop solidarity which "goes side-by side with a critical mind" (p. 43). In particular, Freire et al. (2014) state:

> One of the qualities that we have to be concerned about in education is the quality of getting or creating the ability to answer different challenges with the same speed that things change … We need to form and not to train (p. 37).

In both countries, the choice to move to a remote placement model was nimble and inspired by the need to help form students as professionals, able to engage creatively with the world as it is, as well as imagining how it might be. Our role became one of generating opportunity that was responsive to the possibilities of technology and community needs, rather than being simply reactive. Through this we could generate opportunity, modelling creative responses to crises.

Freire et al. (2014) observe that there is "the necessary solidarity which people who have the same dreams or similar political dreams have to have among themselves in order to struggle against the other side" (p.63). There is no doubt that shared political understandings of the role of early childhood education came into play, and there were shared dreams amongst the academics. We might ask, what were we struggling against? Covid-19 took the role of an aggressor, with dreams and goals disrupted by uncertainty, and potentially, by systemic failure. Solidarity arose from understanding these threats and working collaboratively to address them. For all of us, it was important to recognise that "creating solidarity among those who are different, but have somewhat the same kind of dream implies admitting different understanding of the profile of the dream" (Freire et al., 2014, p. 63). Recognising that our systems and experiences are different, but that we share common values, allows us to view our own values through a different lens, and to respond deeply to the personal interaction taking place, even though this was through a screen. These personal interactions were with peers in class, with parents, families, and childcare centres, with playgroups, between academics, and amongst students on different sides of the world as they listened to, responded to, and learned from one another. While engagement in real neighbourhoods was challenged by COVID-19 restrictions, virtual neighbourhoods were built and developed, based on these same shared values. From the seeds of solidarity emerged the collaboration of community.

The collaboration and ongoing dialogue between the teams in Dublin and Melbourne heightened awareness of aspirations for our students and called into question the ways in which we work. Through our reflections, we identified a deep implicit commitment to what Katz (1977) calls a principle of congruity, that is the belief in "how we teach teachers should be congruent in many basic aspects—but not all—with the way we want them to teach children" (p. 57). This principle accepts that we as lecturers act as models for students and that our ways of teaching support them to create their own professional approach to practice (Vander Ven, 2000; Britzman, 2003; Parsons, 2005). Lortie (1975) has identified this as an apprenticeship of observation, and so

teaching in ways that are relational and empowering increases the likelihood of students adopting these practices when out in the field (Lynch, Mannix McNamara & Seery, 2012).

What emerged strongly through the ongoing discussions between DCU and VU, was that in reconfiguring student placement during Covid-19 we were modelling an 'ethic of care' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Dahlberg and Moss (2005), see ethics as "being about care of and responsibility for the Other" (p.73). This was clearly demonstrated by both teams by the course of action they chose, which was directly influenced by the needs and well-being of their students and the wider community. Both teams established support systems for students by way of additional mentoring and peer communities of practice in order to meet the additional needs of students caused by the pandemic. Teaching is fundamentally a moral enterprise (Strike, 1990) and an ethics of care approach (Noddings, 1992) was, and continues to be, embedded in all aspects of practice in dealing with students across both universities. The VU and DCU teams agreed that much of the moral, ethical and caring dimensions of our teaching are unconscious and are woven into the fabric of our daily encounters with students (Blumenfeld-Jones, Senneville & Crawford, 2013). As teachers or lecturers, we have power to influence the professional identities of our students and the work of the DCU and VU teams sought to heighten students' awareness to what Blumenfeld-Jones et al. (2013) call the felt life, and to give back to the community. Ultimately, the many discussions between colleagues in DCU and VU led us to agree that at the heart of managing remote placement programmes during Covid-19 was the notion that students thrived when given "opportunities to care and be cared for" (Rogers & Webb, 1991, p.178). Baker et al. (2004) concur, noting the importance of promoting equality of love, care and solidarity within the educational system, suggesting students learn best when "they are in a relationship of trust and care with the teacher" (p.164).

The academic teams also modelled how to manage uncertainty and demonstrated that it is acceptable to take risks. Uncertainty in practice has long signalled a relational, rather than a technical, approach in our work with children (Urban, 2008), where educators/teachers follow, use, and respond to children's interests. However, uncertainty was not merely a feature of curriculum or practice during Covid-19, but was the context of life, and for students a reality for placement. Creating an environment where uncertainty and risk were embraced, was the outcome of the DCU and VU teaching teams modelling risk-taking, and nurturing the same attitude within our students. Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner (2020) describe engaging in uncertainty as recognising the

"gaps in knowing how to get there" (p.22) and figuring out "how to get there" (p.21). The findings clearly demonstrate the academics' willingness to "engage in uncertainty" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p. 15), a second characteristic of a social learning space.

Progressivism and education are perhaps most associated with Dewey (1944) and the notions of experiential learning, problem solving, critical thinking, collaborative learning, responsibility and democracy. The early childhood programmes of DCU and VU incorporate many of these ideals and it became evident through discussion that progressivism is deeply embedded within the professional placement programs at the universities. This orientation towards progressivism is evident in the teams' openness to engage in innovative practice.

These changes had significant resource, time and workload implications. Nonetheless, what was found was that, when tested, the system was receptive to the innovations. Both the DCU and VU teams received institutional support of their actions. Despite this, one of the challenges identified by the teams when developing their innovative solutions was the sense of external isolation; they both observed that there appeared to be no other institution in their respective countries who decided to engage in this approach to professional placement. The findings note how this began to disempower them, resulting in the emergence of doubt, leading the academics to question their decisions. Anderson & Li (2014) note innovation cannot occur in isolation, highlighting the criticality of collaboration. Aligned with this, Ritala et al. (2015) suggest a precondition for innovation is the sharing and acquiring of knowledge. An immediate benefit of making the international connection was the sense of relief to connect with other '*like-minded*' individuals. The findings support the discussion of Kahle et al. (2018) on the positive psychological function of teams linking with 'like-minded' HEI individuals working towards similar goals and values. It could be suggested that a culture of progressivism supported through collaboration within and between HEI promotes, encourages, and empowers academics to engage in innovation and risk taking.

Conclusion

This article focuses on exploring the factors that supported the establishment and sustainability of an international connection between academics in two HEIs separated by a geographical distance of over 10,000 miles. Kahle et al. (2018) note the importance of collaboration between academics and HEIs in supporting mutual learning and developing joint solutions, yet also highlight the lack of understanding as to how or why some collaborations are more effective than others.

The findings of this research identified shared values as the most influential factor behind the establishment and sustainability of the international connection, including a strong desire to think and work globally. Through discussions, the academics identified how values influenced their actions in developing remote placement for students and the wider community. Often, values are hidden deep within the subconscious and rarely discussed or made explicit (Hansen, Jensen & Broström, 2018) and yet our values directly influence and guide our behaviours, our ways of thinking, our approaches to teaching, and the way we work with others. The findings support Ricard's (2018) statement "how we choose to use our intelligence depends entirely on the human values which inspire our existence" (p. 531).

The methodology used in this research provides a mechanism which supports the identification of goals and values. It required a two-step process. First, the academics reflected on the concrete experience of developing an innovative response to professional placement by way of narratives. The second step required the academics to engage in philosophical discussion based on the information captured in the narratives, enabling the academics to draw out and make explicit core shared values. Russell and Schneiderheinze (2005) suggest "identifying and understanding teachers' goals and beliefs is critical to creating an evaluative analysis of reform efforts in education" (p. 38).

While values may have played a core role in guiding the work of the academics in this case research, the findings and discussion also highlight the critical role the HEIs played in supporting the academics. The experience has shown that a culture of progressivism within HEIs allows freedom for innovation and risk taking—two essential components of the remote placement programs developed. The environment was conducive to academics being supported to take a risk, which paid off for students, for families and children, for the respective sectors, and for the institutions.

This international connection resulted from the two teams' negotiation of a global issue at a local level. However, it is notable for growing beyond the need for remote placement, to incorporate ways to connect our thinking, our students, and our cultural experiences to enrich our work. The connection enabled a deeper understanding of the policy and practice of pedagogy in ECEC within two different jurisdictions amongst academics and students and highlighted the ways in which values underpin and drive our work. The blog-initiated entanglements could not have been foreseen.

This research highlights how the shared values of solidarity and social justice, congruence and progressivism have promoted effective collaboration and sustainability of connection. Ricard (2018) notes how values are shaped in childhood and evolve through our experiences of others and with the world. This research calls for the explicit acknowledgement of the role values play in collaborative endeavours, and argues that this approach will "encourage children [and adults] to appreciate the importance of human values, of emotional intelligence and of working together" (Ricard, 2018, p.531). The criticality of making international connections, identifying shared values, and working collaboratively cannot be overestimated as we strive to find localised and global solutions to global issues.

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