HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE PLACEMENTS IN TODAY'S CHANGING WORK ENVIRONMENTS: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

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Abstract

My research motivation as a lecturer at MCAST (Malta's state vocational education college) is to improve students' professional development, future-proof their vocational training, and explore better educational theory and practice in the light of fast-moving changes in the social care field. My initial research question is: "How can placements maintain efficacy in the changing context of Malta's culture and with increasing robotic and digital service provision?" Data is collected in Malta, a small island state, addressing technological change in provision of care and issues of culture arising from an increasingly diverse workforce and population. Using Grounded Theory methodology, with a constructivist approach, it builds conceptual knowledge directly from participant data. To mitigate bias arising from power relations between teacher-interviewer and student, and enrich data quality, focus groups are being used. Results emerging indicate the need for: More personalized learning environments and a pedagogy specifically fostering contemporary skill development; Improved communication between students and programme mentors; Closer working relationships between stakeholders and educational institutions. Also emerging is the complex issue of cultural difference between students, staff, and service users. Challenges include trust and respect for diverse attitudes and beliefs, and difficulties in communication and interpretation, all these potentially affecting care standards. The research asks how such challenges might be overcome and aims to propose new teaching strategies preparing graduates to be caring professionals who contribute to providers' business success.

Keywords: *Health & social care, placements, technology, culture, grounded theory.*

1. Introduction

I currently teach at Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), a government-run facility for vocational education in Malta. One of my duties is teaching level 3 social care students, who are placed in health and social care departments. Placements are required for the social care module in level 3, but few studies—especially in small island nations like Malta—have examined students' accounts and opinions regarding the learning outcomes from these placements. This doctoral thesis looks at the experiences of students during placements and to help with this, the study makes use of grounded theory.

2. Context of research

Educational institutions are under pressure to adapt in response to changes and demands that are occurring in the education sector both locally and globally. These changes and demands include new technology, globalisation of labor, economic and industrial restructuring, and the desire to increase productivity. Graduates who can hit the ground running and help businesses succeed are what the industry looks for. Today's students must also possess a wide range of abilities that will allow them to transition into the workforce with ease, solve complicated challenges, and show resilience, teamwork, effective communication, and good self-management. Placements offer students a first-hand, "hands on" experience in the industry, so this project tries to explain how placements are used, how useful they are as a teaching and training tool right now, and how this aspect of training may be enhanced and improved.

3. Research aims and problems

My initial research question is: "How can placements maintain efficacy in the changing context of Malta's culture and with increasing robotic and digital service provision?" My aims are to address the need for flexible teaching methodologies, giving lecturers the tools they need to meet the needs of the classroom of the future. It is in line with the issues that organisations like MCAST face.

4. Research methodology

The decision to conduct a qualitative study was obvious given that this method is frequently used to understand opinions and perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It enables me to delve into the why behind particular actions and attitudes, providing a greater comprehension of what drives the participants.

A very important aspect for choosing qualitative analysis is that it will allow me to modify methodology and queries whilst diving more into the data, enabling a more dynamic research process. According to Sutton & Austin (2015) qualitative analysis gives the researcher the freedom to study the data without being constrained by preexisting beliefs, regarded to be of the utmost importance in this research since I as the researcher can have some bias considering I had placement settings myself while I was a nursing student. In fact, in the early stages of the study, I made notes about my ideas, emotions, perceptions and presumptions trying to guarantee credibility and open responsibility. Grounded theory will be the main technique used to undertake qualitative analysis in this study. By inductively analysing their data both after and during the collection process, researchers can create hypotheses and theories from the ground up using grounded theory (Birks & Mills 2015). This is particularly helpful when researching complicated and dynamic circumstances, such as placement settings, where standard theories may not apply or may not sufficiently capture the intricacies of the context.

Makri & Neely (2021) state that grounded theory places a strong emphasis on thoroughly examining the context. Grounded Theory urges researchers to document these people' viewpoints and experiences, enabling a more thorough investigation of the setting's dynamics (Cullen & Brennan, 2021). Besides this, in placement contexts where complex relationships and processes are in play, grounded theory emphasises the requirement for extensive and thorough descriptions of the data. Makri & Neely (2021) also state that grounded theory provides flexibility in study design, enabling researchers to modify their approaches and inquiries in response to new information. This adaptability is useful in placement situations, which might be unpredictable and prone to change.

5. Data analysis

Originally, I chose semi structure interviews to collect data in order to restore some control to the interviewees. This approach works well when the respondents are generally shy and reticent to communicate. Using semi-structured interviews allows some flexibility; for example, they permit the interviewer to pursue issues of particular significance that relate to the research question (Rose, 1994, as cited by Duffy, 2004) and at the same time give the opportunity to the participant to express himself / herself. However, trying to gather data without forcing responses that match what the researcher believes to be the 'main issues' is a major part of the Grounded Theory methodology.

Power dynamics during data collecting can be influenced by the researchers' experience and subject-matter competence. Researchers with more experience or knowledge might exert control over participants by directing the course of interviews or forcing their interpretations on them. Also, power dynamics in data collecting can be influenced by the type of relationship that exists between researchers and participants. Research partnerships with asymmetrical roles, like those between a teacher and a student, may give rise to unequal power dynamics that could affect participants' willingness to share information or voice divergent opinions.

In my research project, I experienced firsthand the problem of power imbalance between the interview subjects and the researcher because in addition to conducting the interviews, I also serve as the interviewees' teacher. Focus groups were then utilised to lessen this bias. Focus groups were also conducted with my former students from the previous year, whom I no longer teach. Employing an interviewer with no personal connection to the participants was another element that was tested.

6. Results

Currently, my primary findings indicate the need for more customised learning environments and a teaching style that encourages the acquisition of contemporary skills, improved communication between

students and programme mentors and a closer partnership between stakeholders and educational institutions. The complex issue of cultural disparities among staff members, clients, and students is also coming to light. The study examines possible remedies for these issues. Challenges include trust and respect for diverse attitudes and beliefs, and difficulties in communication and interpretation, all these potentially affecting care standards. The findings from the preliminary assessment of the literature and my experience both as a lecturer and as a former student doing placements complemented the participants' views, feelings, and reflective thoughts. I used the Strauss and Corbin (2015) paradigm by keeping an eye out for occurrences and happenings (contextual conditions), examining how the participants give meaning to these occurrences (actions and reactions), and then identifying the repercussions (consequences and outcomes). The matrix in figure 1 depicts the conditions which might influence the action interaction of participants that are impacted by the consequences derived by these conditions.

Contextual conditions: Participants discussed their views and challenges on study placements, highlighting the impact of contextual conditions such as work, personal characteristics and MCAST and teachers' management on the experience.

Actions and Reactions: Placement situations involve various behaviors and responses from individuals and organizations, depending on objectives, assumptions, and dynamics. Students, stakeholders, and educational institutions may act differently.

Consequences and Outcomes: Placement environments can have positive or negative effects on participants and companies. Negative effects include job dissatisfaction due to limited skill development and staff assistance. Benefits include recommendations and personal growth.
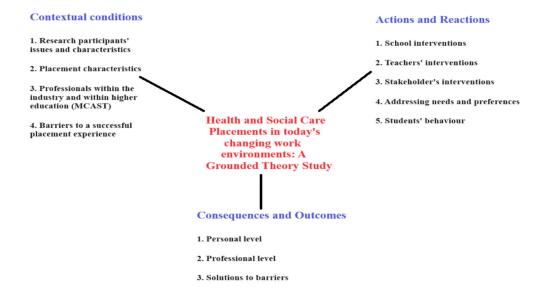
Figure 1. The interrelationships between the three constructs and their categories.

Contextual conditions

1. Research participants' issues and characteristics

2. Placement characteristics

3. Professionals within the industry and within higher education (MCAST)

4. Barriers to a successful placement experience

Actions and Reactions

1. School interventions

2. Teachers' interventions

3. Stakeholder's interventions

4. Addressing needs and preferences

5. Students' behaviour

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Consequences and Outcomes

1. Personal level

2. Professional level

3. Solutions to barriers

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